

Chapter 1

“Hey Adam! Long time no see, lol! I hope you’ve been doing well, getting all adjusted to college life and everything...isn’t it crazy that we go to the same place and haven’t run into each other yet?? But I know yer busy...heard you made the soccer team, nice going! Tho I can’t really say I’m surprised, since you’re totally athletic now, pretty much the opposite of me, lol. Anywho I’m rambling now but I just wanted to see if you wanted to play a little D&D sometime soon? For nostalgia’s sake? Would be just like old times, heh. Yer prob. really busy so totally understand if you don’t have the time, but jus thought I’d ask. Lol ok I will end this novel now. Miss you! <3”

Mila Rainsly felt her heart beating uncomfortably fast as she read over the text message that she was about to send to her old friend. Her phone screen lit up her face in an otherwise pitch-black dorm room. It was the middle of the night, and Mila had uncharacteristically downed a couple beers as she went over some D&D character sheets. Since Mila wasn’t a big drinker, the two beers had made her feel quite tipsy, to the point where she had actually drummed up the courage to text Adam, to do what she had wanted to do for months, ever since they had both arrived at Westview University.

Adam Bedford was an old friend from grade school, and he and Mila had bonded intimately in middle school over their simultaneous discovery of D&D. The game had been a live-saving window for both of them into a fantastical world, where they could be free to explore and create to their heart’s content. And, as the two of them spent countless hours together on their self-made adventures, they had both developed a deep affection for each other that lasted all the way through high school.

However, as Adam matured, things changed between the two of them. While Adam didn’t lose any of his affection for Mila, he grew out of his awkward, underdeveloped body, and blossomed into a tall, handsome young man with stand-out athletic abilities. He had lettered in both soccer and football at their high school, a rare double feat, and with his newfound athletic prowess came new social opportunities. As high school progressed, Adam found himself hanging out more and more with the “popular kids,” who were all eager to incorporate this tall, good-looking star athlete into their groups. Adam was always nice to Mila, of course, and whenever he saw her in the hall he smiled or waved, but as time went on, she couldn’t help but notice that they spent less and less time together, and no time playing their beloved D&D anymore.

Blinking at her bright screen through the darkness, Mila kept reading over her text message, weighing whether to send it. She had never begrudged Adam his popularity or his athletic success – in fact, she had always been quite proud of him, and had never missed one of his sports games in high school. From a distance, she looked on, admiring his achievements and taking heart in his apparent happiness, even if a part of her was crestfallen inside. Mila knew that she loved Adam...that she was IN love with him...that she had been for some time, even before things started to change between them. There was something about the kind light in his bright blue eyes, about how his short, sandy-brown hair always got ruffled no matter how much he tried to flatten it out...he was so smart and nice and cute and...just, fun. She had never met

another guy like him, and she was not at all surprised that, even after all his success in sports, and with the popular groups, he never really seemed to get a big head. He always had time to say hi to her.

Mila blinked in the darkness and sighed. A kind of heaviness was descending on her, and suddenly her eyes felt like they were a little too big for their sockets. She blinked again, and her eyes started to mist over.

'Oh come on,' she thought exasperatedly to herself, 'Not this...don't cry...what are you crying over!? Two drinks and you're a wreck! Pull yourself together!'

The truth was, Mila knew exactly why she was getting a little teary, aside from the obvious effect of the beers, of course. In moments like these, it was difficult for her not to feel bad about her own life trajectory. Just as Adam had flourished into a tall, dashing, charismatic athlete with lots of outgoing, popular friends, Mila had never really developed into a vigorous woman. To begin with, she was short, having been stuck at 5'2 ever since she was a young teenager. But she wasn't just short – she had been rather sickly through high school, and as a result, she was frail and skinny, weighing only 105 pounds. Her breasts were only A-cups, and there wasn't much of a difference between her hips and her waist...nothing like the tall, voluptuous bombshells Adam routinely hung out with.

Mila sniffed in the darkness and took several big, deep breaths. She felt ridiculous for even allowing herself to get this emotional. She didn't actually feel any jealousy towards those hot, popular girls – she was happy that Adam was able to attract people like that. He deserved it. There was no way that she, Mila, would ever feel like she had a right to him. How could she claim such a right now!? She wasn't ugly, per se...and even though she knew that her body was frail and weak, Mila didn't actually hate the way she looked. But she knew that her frumpy, curly brown hair, combined with her overall awkwardness and dorky demeanor, put her completely out of league with Adam. There was no way around it: he had outgrown her, and there was nothing that she could really do about it.

In the darkness of her dorm room, Mila felt her heart sink a little. She had been pretty good about not letting herself get stuck in this mindset so far at Westview, but something about tonight...combined with those beers...it just made her feel like wallowing a little in the sadness of it all. She loved him, and she knew that he loved her...as an old friend, at least. But she could never have him the way that she would want, like she had back in the old days when it was just the two of them, holding hands as they waltzed through their D&D fantasy world together.

'But just because I can't have him like that,' Mila thought suddenly to herself, 'Doesn't mean that we can't just...just play a game sometime...to have fun! Why can't we? There's no reason why we can't do that! If I can just...just press...send...'

Her finger hovered over the button. She knew she had been drinking, and she knew that she was probably going to regret this in the morning. But she wasn't really *that* tipsy...and besides, if she just admitted that Adam didn't think about her anymore and just allowed herself to dissolve into the background, she'd be miserable forever. She felt something flare up in her, and she inhaled sharply through her nose, quickly letting it out again, as she pressed "send."

The next two hours passed by at an agonizingly slow pace for Mila. After she had sent Adam the message, she had put her phone on silent and turned it upside down on her nightstand, so that she wouldn't spend the next, well...however long feeling tortured that her screen wasn't lighting up with a text from Adam. She lasted ten minutes before she finally had to lift her phone up to check and see if he had texted back. It was impossible not to feel a bit dejected when she saw that he hadn't.

'Oh...*come on*, Mila," she thought to herself, 'It's Friday night, for god's sake! He's probably out partying with his friends, having a good time...probably not even checking his phone he's having so much fun. Give him at least some time to text you back!'

At first, she was able to distract herself fairly easily. Already she was starting to feel a little groggy from the two beers, so she resolved to have a nice, hot, relaxing shower.

'That'll take a while,' she thought to herself, 'I'll make it a long one, too.'

Mila prepared everything – she turned on the shower, pulled the curtain to, and closed the bathroom door, so that the room would steam up rapidly. She took her clothes off and then stood in front of the mirror, looking at herself. A sinking feeling weighed down on her, and she couldn't help but sigh a little. Plenty of people thought she was cute...or, well, at least cute-ish, in an awkward, nerdy kind of way. She wished her curly brown hair was straighter and sleeker; she wished her boobs were bigger; she wished that she could do something about the acne that kept popping out on her forehead; she wished that she were taller; she wished that she had better curves, thicker hips, a better ass...she wished...she wished...

"Knock it off!" she said out loud to her own reflection. "Everyone is insecure!" But she knew that not everyone was as insecure as she was. She remembered her shower, and got excited again. Maybe...just maybe he had...

She checked her phone again and promptly flipped it face-down again. He hadn't texted back.

'Shower!' she thought. 'Nice...long shower...' She opened the door to the bathroom again and steam billowed out. She sighed pleasantly, shutting herself in and stepping into the bathtub as she pulled the curtain to.

Mila made her best effort to try and clear her mind while she was under the hot water. She shampooed her hair with Selsun Blue Maximum Strength, which she used to keep her dandruff under control, and this evening, she took special pleasure in leaving it on her scalp for 5 whole

minutes. The menthol cooled her scalp as she sat down in the tub, letting the hot water impinge down on her legs as she breathed in the hot steam. She thought about the new Lord of the Rings show that was coming out later that year, and she wondered whether the actress playing the younger Galadriel would be able to bring the stately wisdom necessary for such an august and important role. She thought about what kind of D&D campaign she would play with Adam when he got back to her...heck, maybe he was even still playing these days! They hadn't really kept up with each other, so she had no idea what he was doing – for all she knew, he was running his own D&D campaign, with a bunch of other people!

'No, no! There's no way he's doing that!' she thought to herself. 'He would have told me about it, and invited me to play...right?'

But then Mila started worrying that perhaps she was assuming too much. Maybe he WAS playing his own campaign, but he only invited super-hot attractive girls from the cheerleading squad or soccer team or wherever, and...and they got drunk together playing every Friday night...and...and maybe they were playing right now, which is why he hadn't texted her back, and maybe he had even mentioned to them that she had texted and they were all having a good laugh, and –

"STOP...IT!" she said forcefully out loud, jerking her head up in the shower. The dandruff shampoo had started getting in her eyes, reminding her that it was time to wash it off...and also that the main reason she was taking this shower was to calm herself down, and to quit worrying about Adam. He would get back to her – she just had to be patient. And anyway, he had always been kind to her. She couldn't see him making fun of her to anyone.

About 20 minutes later, the bathroom had become so hot and steamy that Mila was forced to get out of the shower. She did so reluctantly, even though her fingers had started to prune from being under the water for so long. Once she had wrested control of her thoughts away from her paranoia, the steady, hot water of the shower had been a welcome and meditative reprieve from her anxieties...and most importantly, she couldn't keep checking her phone when she was in the shower.

But now that she was out, it was only a matter of time. Standing in front of the mirror, she towed off her curly brown hair and then, on a whim, decided to blow-dry it. She knew that blasting her hair with heat was going to make it jump up into an uncontained pile of frizz, but it was another way to pass the time.

'And besides,' she thought to herself as she turned on the blow-dryer, 'It's not like I'm going out or anything. Who cares if my hair's all crazy?'

Another 15 minutes passed, and Mila had reached a point where she could no longer justify what she was doing, and she switched off the hair-dryer, sighing and shrugging at her reflection.

“Oh look,” she chuckled out loud, suddenly appreciating the humor in how ridiculous she looked, “It’s little Miss Frizzle.”

She turned around to check her butt in the mirror.

‘I don’t have a bad butt,’ she thought, trying to twerk a little, ‘I really don’t...’

But of course, her thoughts inevitably drifted to those hot athlete girls John always hung out with in high school. There’s no way that she could compete with *them*.

And, just like that, she was on the way to check her phone again. Her heart sped up as she flipped her phone over. It had been almost an hour since she had texted him...maybe...just maybe, he had texted back now!?

But again, nothing. Maya felt her heart sink, and she dropped her phone down on her bed, blinking at her pillows. For a second, she actually thought that she was about to cry.

‘No!’ she thought savagely to herself, wiping her nose and sniffing, ‘I’m *not* gonna be like this...this is...this is *ridiculous*, getting all worked-up about Adam over nothing. He’s busy, he’ll get back to you, end of story.’

Her buzz had started wearing off from those two beers, and Mila remembered that there were four more sitting in the fridge. She had bought a 6-pack of High Life the day before, since she had been feeling a little moody, and down for some edgy fun. She knew that she was an absolute lightweight when it came to alcohol, and even though she was in college now, she was straightlaced enough never to have even tried weed. Whenever she had more than a couple drinks, she always regretted it the next day.

But at this moment, those four remaining beers seemed quite inviting. Without giving herself time to consider the matter, Mila strode out of her bedroom, and a moment later, the open fridge was lighting up the dark kitchen. The golden High Life bottles sat there on the top shelf, winking at her. Mila knew that she would have a hangover the next day if she drank any more, but her anxiety around texting Adam was still threatening to boil over, despite her desperate mental attempts to contain it.

‘Oh screw it!’ she thought suddenly, reaching into the fridge and grabbing two more beers, ‘So what if I have a hangover tomorrow? I’ll just hang out in bed and re-watch “The Desolation of Smaug Extended Edition.” And...and...’

But she didn’t allow her thoughts to keep going, because she knew what would come next would be self-pitying and pathetic, and Mila was trying to get out of those bad mental habits. She brought the beer back to her bed, checked her phone one more time (no response, as expected), and switched it to “vibrate,” just so she would quit checking it, and dropped it onto her bed once more. She resolved to forget that she had even texted Adam.

An hour later, Mila was scrolling through some fantasy forums, snorting to herself in laughter as she read some comments from a few of her online friends about how Amazon had totally messed up the “Wheel of Time” series. She had her headphones on, which were playing the “Legend of Zelda” soundtrack. On her nightstand stood one half-drunk bottle of beer, next to another empty one. Needless to say, the lightweight Mila was feeling rather toasty at this point. The beer had done its job; for the moment, at least, she had managed to push Adam out of her head. She was just about to post a reply in the thread when she suddenly felt something vibrating under her right butt cheek.

“What the...?” she exclaimed, a little startled. But almost immediately, she realized that, in her tipsy determination to avoid it, she had accidentally sat on her phone. Before she could even register what she was doing, Mila was jerking her hand forward to try and catch the laptop that was tumbling off her thighs and onto the floor. She had jerked her leg up in her fumbling haste to get to her phone, and only just managed to soften her laptop’s fall before it hit the floor beside her bed.

But Mila wasn’t really even worried about that – she had flipped her phone around and was breathing hard, her heart revved up in expectation. A text...from Adam!! She opened it and started reading, with little lights popping in front of her eyes because of how tipsy she was.

“Hi Mila!” it read, “So nice to hear from you! Haha yeah, been pretty busy recently. We’re doing two-a-day practices for soccer and it’s kicking my ass lol! I know we’re just a D3 school but still, the way they train us, you wouldn’t know it, haha! I would love to play some D&D sometime soon! It’s crazy, I was just thinking the other day about how fun those times were. Maybe it was the LOTR trailer I saw that made me think of it. Anyway, I’m actually gonna be super busy starting next week, since my frat is doing a bunch of stuff, and the soccer season’s starting soon, so how about tomorrow? Lol I know it’s short notice, but just let me know! Miss you too! :)”

Mila’s eyes earnestly scanned over Adam’s message time and time again, absorbing it, processing it, drinking it up. At first, she wasn’t even reading to understand the words; she was just amazed that he had actually texted her back...and the same night, too!

‘Friday night!’ she thought to herself. ‘He took time out of his *Friday* night...to get back to me!’

A few minutes later, when she had finally read the message enough times to satiate herself, she had to laugh a little at herself from getting so worked up over a message that was just a normal, ordinary response to what she had sent before. It was nice to hear that he was doing well, and of course, Mila wasn’t at all surprised that he was so busy, and apparently about to get a lot busier. She had caught him, it seemed, at exactly the right moment, and she felt almost dizzy with happiness at the thought of not only getting to see him, but actually playing a D&D game with him.

But as the initial thrill of Adam's message wore off, Mila started to feel a little panicked. She was going to see him...*tomorrow*! That left her almost no time to mentally and emotionally prepare, and, even worse, because she had recklessly just decided to have herself a beer night (tonight of all nights, she thought!), she was going to be hungover!

'Sheesh, you just totally did that to yourself, didn't you?' she thought ruefully, 'Maybe if you quit being such a drama queen, you wouldn't get yourself into these situations.'

The unpleasant thought occurred to her that, if she appeared visibly hungover the next day, Adam might deduce that she had texted him when she was drunk, and then maybe her reaching out to him would seem more like a desperate ploy to see him, rather than as a genuine desire to catch up.

'But I can make sure he doesn't know,' she thought quickly, her mind starting to race as it made plans, 'I can...I can make sure I, uh...I drink lots of water, and I can...uhm, well gee, how do you prevent a hangover, anyway!?''

She got back on her laptop and started searching for ways to avoid or cure a hangover...Vitamin C, eating a big breakfast, coffee, taking a multivitamin, and so on.

'I'll just do it all,' Mila thought, 'I'll do all the stuff, and at least some of them are bound to work, right!?''

About this time, with a cold shot, Mila realized that she hadn't even texted Adam back yet. It had barely been ten minutes, but the realization made her start to panic all over again. But she caught herself, taking more deep breaths as she calmed down. She even managed to have a little laugh about it.

'Heheh, now *he's* the one waiting for a response!' she thought humorously, appreciating that she probably thought this was funny because she was a little drunk. But she resolved to settle her nerves and write back a response that didn't reflect her inebriation. She re-situated herself in the bed, wiggling her butt until she got comfortable, and then bit her lower lip as she hunched over her phone in concentration. About five minutes later, after a series of erasures and double-backs, she had finally crafted the most laid-back response she could muster:

"No, tomorrow sounds great! Haha I'm generally pretty free on the weekends, so that works perfect! Got some stuff to take care of earlier in the day, but maybe like, late afternoon, early evening? I've still got the old hex board we used back in the day and of course the d4s, d6s, up to d20. Lol as you can tell I haven't stopped playing :D Anyway, super-excited to see you!"

Mila had read over the message a few times, and then, before reading over still more (which she wanted to do), the pressure of not having responded became too great, and she simply pressed "send." As the message turned blue, she immediately spotted the typo.

“God damn it!” she exclaimed, and rapidly wrote “*excited* lol i don’t know what excited means” and sent it. She wondered whether or not the typo would betray that she had been drinking, but her excitement was beginning to outweigh her anxiety at this point. She wasn’t waiting with the same bated breath for Adam’s response this time – she knew that he would get back to her, and, less than two minutes later, he did.

‘Oh my god, it was like...he was waiting for my text!’ laughed Mila to herself, feeling slightly stupid because of just how excited she was. She made sure, though, to quickly remind herself not to start playing mind games with herself, and somehow manage to convince herself that Adam had the hots for her.

‘He’s just a friend,’ she thought, nodding firmly to herself, as she geared up to read the message, ‘Just a friend who’s catching up with me, nothing more...’

Adam’s message was encouraging:

“Lol well I’m super-excited to see you too! You remember I was never the best speller, after all, haha! And yeah, later on in the day sounds good! Maybe we could even grab dinner somewhere first? There’s that Italian place, Louie’s, that has really good pasta! You down?”

Mila’s heart was racing now. Without thinking, she texted back, “Oh yeah, totally! I love Italian!”

Her fingers felt like they were charging up with electricity as she waited for Adam’s response, which came only seconds later:

“Awesome! Meet there at 7?”

“Perfect! Aaaaah I’m so excited!”

“Me too, see ya then! :)”

For the next 15 minutes, Mia was basking in a sea of bliss on her bed. She re-read their entire conversation over and over, and although she cringed at how awkward she sounded, especially in her opening text, she kept reminding herself that Adam had responded perfectly well to whatever she had said, so really, it couldn’t have been that bad, after all.

The issue remained, of course, of her impending hangover, but right now Mila was simply too thrilled to even care about that. She jumped out of bed and proceeded to pace excitedly up and down her bedroom, clenching and unclenching her hands by her sides as her mind raced through all the excitement that had been set in motion. What would she wear!? It went without saying that it would be a bad mistake to go too crazy and dress in something super-formal. Adam would probably just be decked out in his usual casual jeans, t-shirt, and jacket that always looked so effortlessly good on him. Wait...what kind of place was this “Louie’s?” Was it...was it actually a formal place? Had Adam invited her out to a fancy Italian joint for dinner!?

'Cool it...cool it...' Mila chanted at herself, and she bounded back into bed on her stomach, opening her phone to get the lay of the land on Louis's. A greater part of her than she cared to admit was hoping that Louie's was a high-class bistro, and so she felt slightly deflated when she saw that the pasta dishes were only going for \$10 to \$14. And then of course, directly after this deflation came the self-ridicule and wry amusement.

'What were you thinking it was going to be!?' she chided herself, managing to find humor in the mad, whimsical notions that had popped into her head. 'Did you seriously think that Adam was gonna just take you out to some luxury Michelin-Star place!?'

Mila quickly had to remind herself that Adam wasn't actually "taking her out," either – they were just meeting up as friends. He wasn't going to pay for her, and that was just fine.

'You're the one who set this whole thing up in the first place!' she laughed to herself. Mila knew that her mind was a fuzzy whirlwind of insecurity when Adam was concerned, especially when she had been drinking, and so she was able to lie back in her bed, chuckling at the excited mania of her own thoughts, as she reassured herself that she would feel a lot more "put together" the next day.

Fifteen minutes later, after forcing herself to drink three big glasses of water (along with a multivitamin, of course), and after diligently flossing and brushing her teeth, and wiping down her face and lathering on her retinol night cream, Mila got into bed and turned off the light. She knew that if she didn't will herself to go to sleep right now, then she would be up all night, buzzing with excitement, and then she would look like hell the next day from lack of sleep.

"Just turn your brain off, Mila," she whispered to herself out loud, as she lay on her side, all wrapped up in her covers, with her frizzy head on the pillow. Her whispered words melded into unspoken thoughts as she closed her eyes and dedicated herself to sleep:

'You know how you can get...just turn it all off, and imagine you're taking a leisurely stroll through Hobbiton, saying hi to the neighbors...you're going to see Adam, you're gonna play D&D, and it's gonna be nothing but fun...nothing but amazing, just to see him, to spend time with him...'

In the past year or so, Mila had made substantial progress in quieting her anxious mind as she tried to sleep, and this night in particular, the soporific effect of the alcohol working on her brain augmented her meditative efforts. Less than ten minutes later, despite her high excitement for the next day Mila drifted off to sleep, with the sun smiling gladly through the grass-roofed hobbit holes in her mind.

The next day, Mila woke up around 11am, which was quite late for her, with a slight headache. But it wasn't anything compared to what she had been afraid of, and in any case, her thoughts went immediately toward her dinner date (not a date! she told herself again...not a date!) with

Adam that evening. She took some ibuprofen to neutralize her headache for good, and then took another shower, this time taking special care to style her hair with more care and precision. She used her curling iron to give herself a tumble of brown curls that bunched around her face, framing it as well as it could.

'It'll do,' Mila thought, bouncing her hair in the mirror, as she was tempted to give way to the naysaying thoughts that she wasn't nearly as pretty as the girls Adam probably hung out with. She decided to forgo any kind of formal clothes, as much as she wanted to doll herself up for the occasion.

'He'll think it's weird if I show up looking like I'm...like I'm going to prom or something,' she thought, and so she decided to wear her best pair of skinny jeans, a black pair that she thought sat well on her hips and ass, and didn't make her thighs seem too big. She thought about wearing her Tyrion "Game of Thrones" t-shirt, but she settled instead on a red blouse that she thought went well with her black jeans.

'I don't wanna look like something the cat dragged in,' she thought. 'No t-shirts...but Adam can wear one if he wants of course. He can do anything he wants – he'll look gorgeous no matter what.'

She decided to wear a little pair of casual 2-inch black heels, which made her 5'6. Mila rarely wore heels of any kind, and actually, this turned out to be the most difficult part of her wardrobe. She was worried that Adam would think that the heels were too formal, but she also reminded herself that without the little added height boost, she felt pretty shrimpy. Finally, she decided to just go for it.

'So what if he thinks I'm a little dressed up?' she thought, 'I'm excited to see him, and I wanna at least do a halfway decent job of looking good for him.'

The rest of the afternoon went by agonizingly slow for Mila. Without meaning to, she had gotten ready 4 hours early. She was happy, at least, that she wasn't really hungover, although she did have to remind herself to eat something for lunch, since her stomach was a bit...well, off. But she didn't know if this was because of her drinking the night before, or just because she was nervous.

At last, it was 6:30, and Mila was ready to go. It only took 10 minutes to get to Louie's, according to the map on her phone, but the last thing she wanted to do was show up late.

'I can wait in my car if I'm super-early,' she thought. The next moment, she was out the door, her heart fluttering with nervous excitement, as her feet clacked on the floor in an unfamiliar cadence. She had no idea what this night would bring.

Chapter 2

Mila's hands felt even more unsure than usual as she gingerly guided her white Volvo sedan through the Westview University campus. She had never been the most confident driver, no doubt owing to the fact that she could become rather scatterbrained, and to her general discomfort around big machinery. She had never been able to wrap her mind around the idea that *she* was the one in control of this big, multi-ton piece of metal, and so, true to her meek and kindly disposition, she assuaged her fears by driving very slowly. In a town full of hormonal young adults, this style of driving was often met with exasperated honks, and with rapid lane shifts as the cars stuck behind her competed to irately merge around her.

Usually, whenever this happened, Mila would reply to the honking out loud, with a helpless 'I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Just trying not to get into a wreck!' but this evening, she didn't even care. She could sense people tailing close behind her car, in an attempt to get her to speed up, and it didn't even stress her out. Her nervous, excited energy that came from the expectation of hanging out with Adam trumped everything else.

By the time she pulled into the parking lot of Louie's, her hands were a little sweaty. Mila realized that she had been gripping the steering wheel harder than she usually did, and she had to laugh at herself a little as she turned her car off and wiped her hands on her black jeans.

'I'm not really that much of a nervous wreck,' she chuckled to herself, shaking her head, 'I'm just...I'm just excited!'

Even though she was definitely trying to explain away her rapid heartbeat, what Mila told herself was true. In times past, when she had been overwhelmed by anxiety, she had simply fled certain situations, back to the safety of her bedroom, where she could be free to dissolve into her fantasy worlds without having to deal with the unwanted realities of the real world. But right now, even though she was jittery with nerves, she wasn't even thinking about ditching on Adam.

'I'll feel better when I see him,' she thought, as she looked at the digital time in her car clock, which was still visible due to her key still being in the ignition. 6:50. She was ten minutes early.

'Maybe not quite time to go inside yet,' she thought, and she stared out her car window at the picturesque sunset that was slowly bleeding out across the sky. It hadn't rained at all that day, but a series of dark clouds had been gathering in the west for several hours, and they were now being blown in by a series of fitful and tempestuous winds that seemed to sharpen the vibrant oranges, deep reds, and creeping purples of the sunset. Mila saw the oak trees beginning to bow and wave as the winds kicked up.

'You know what?' she thought suddenly, 'I bet that breeze will feel nice on my face. Screw it, I'll go in early and get us a table. Who cares if it makes me look desperate or something...one of us has to get here before the other, right?'

She banged both hands on her steering wheel resolutely, took her key out of the ignition, and then swiftly exited the vehicle, taking care not to trip in her 2-inch heels as she got out. The wind was whipping around more than she had expected, and it nearly took her breath away, sweeping across her face with a boisterous and blustery smack.

“Whooo!” Mila exclaimed out loud, gathering her purse in the crook of her arm as she steadied herself against the driver’s door she had just closed. She had been right, though – the wind certainly felt good against her face. It seemed to blow away all the insecurities and complications that were going on inside her head, and as she looked out into the beautiful sunset, fanned underneath by the swaying oak trees, she felt a renewed sense of confidence in herself. The world looked gorgeous...and something that had seemed impossible less than 24 hours before was now actually about to happen.

Mila clacked down the parking lot toward the front door of Louie’s, and, upon rounding the corner, she looked up and stopped dead in her tracks. Adam was already there. He was standing by the front door, under the awning, looking out at the same sunset, with one hand in his pocket. Mila felt a sudden, hot injection of adrenaline rocket through her, as her diaphragm clenched up. He hadn’t spotted her yet, and so she had a chance to take him in all at once. He was wearing a pair of stylish blue jeans, which weren’t too tight, but tight enough to show off the enticing shape of his legs...a black collared polo short-sleeve shirt, untucked, with two buttons undone...his toned arms hanging by his sides, with one forearm tensing and untensing as he played with something in his pocket...god, he looked so hot...so *casual*...that mess of short, sandy-brown hair on his head...and that slightly droopy way he had of standing when he was just...just chilling. Mila was feeling the electricity crackle all across her body, and she certainly felt it in between her legs in particular. Even she was surprised by the intensity of her reaction.

‘Keep moving,’ she told herself, ‘Keep moving or else he’s gonna look over and see you standing here like an idiot. Get a move on!’

Mila stepped forward a single pace, and that was enough to divert Adam’s attention away from the sunset. He looked straight at her, and his blue eyes lit up.

“Mila!” he exclaimed, jerking his hand out of his pocket and spreading both hands wide as he straightened up and came towards her.

“H-Hiii!” she laughed, smiling from ear to ear as she spread her arms in the same motion, increasing her pace towards him. Apparently he had sped up a little too, because they half-ran into each other as they embraced. Mila could smell his deodorant as they hugged...the same kind he had used in high school. She felt her body compressed by his strong arms, and she squeezed him tightly back. In this moment, she didn’t care if she was giving herself away. She was just so happy to see him, to feel him.

“Hahaha wow!” Adam laughed, pulling out of the hug and grinning down at her, “it’s been forever!”

“Oh god I knowwww, right!?” Mila returned, nodding. She had forgotten how tall Adam was – she could’ve sworn he had gotten even taller. He was 5’11 at the end of high school, but now he looked to be over 6 feet. Even in her 2-inch heels, which made her a healthy 5’6, she had to crane her neck to look up into his face.

“Looks like we picked the right time, huh?” Adam chuckled, looking up at the sky. “Feels like it might start raining here soon.”

“Yeah! It was...uh...it was like, all sunny before,” Mila replied, turning around to look at the sunset. The storm clouds had started moving in front of it, and the water droplets in the clouds turned into millions of prisms, shooting the setting sun out across the sky in even more brilliant oranges, reds, and purples. Despite her excitement at seeing Adam, Mila’s eyes lingered on the dramatic beauty of the sun and clouds. It was the most striking sunset she had ever seen.

“Geez, pretty amazing sunset, huh?” remarked Adam. He too was staring at the spectacular sight, and as Mila turned back to look at him, she caught sight of the image of his face lit up by the sunset, with the breeze from the incoming storm blowing his sandy-brown hair back from his face. He looked...sooooo hot. And then, at that moment, Adam’s eyes switched down, back to hers, and caught her looking at him. But, true to his character, rather than embarrass her, he simply broke into a big open smile and started laughing.

“Hahaha look at us, gushing over a sunset!” he joked. “Are we already turning into middle-aged romantics, like our parents?”

“Oh *god*...I hope not!” laughed Mila. It felt comforting to her that Adam had brought up their parents, who had all been friends for years.

“Haha so...” chuckled Adam, his smile drawing everything out for a few moments as he looked at her. Mila basked under his eyes; at this point, she wasn’t even trying to analyze what he was thinking about her. She was just thrilled he was looking at her.

“So, wanna go inside?” he ventured a few seconds later. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving!”

“Oh! Yeah!” exclaimed Mila. She had completely forgotten they were standing outside of an Italian restaurant. “I...haha...I’m hungry too, but, uhh...like, heh, probably not like you, since you’re...you know, a big athlete and everything.”

“Yeah, like my mom says, I’m still a growing boy!” laughed Adam, as they walked into the restaurant. He made eye contact with the hostess and smiled. “A table for two, please!”

Mila made an effort to contain herself as the hostess led the two of them to their table. Adam was so confident, so effortlessly assertive...the hostess probably assumed they were

dating...wait! No...no, she couldn't start thinking like that...this was just a fun D&D get-together, nothing more...nothing more...

"So how's it been going?" asked Adam amiably, after they sat down. "Whacha been up to these past...uh...god, when was the last time we saw each other!?"

"I think...uh, was it graduation?" asked Mila. She was pretending to be unsure; the reality was that she knew perfectly well that it had been their high school graduation.

"Wow...that long, huh?" chuckled Adam, shaking his head. "Well I guess it's only been a few months, but still..."

"Heh, maybe...uhm, maybe it feels like a longer time because of...uhhh...you know, because so much has changed and...and we're in college and everything," offered Mila. She was doing a good job of keeping her voice under control, but in this early stage of the conversation, everything she said felt like it took a titanic effort on her part.

"Ha! You got that right!" laughed Adam, reaching for his water glass and downing half of it in a couple gulps. "Nothing like a big change in routine to shake everything up."

"Mhmm," nodded Mila, reaching for her own water glass and taking a token sip. The ice water felt good against her lips, and she drank a little more, enjoying the cooling sensation as it went down. It seemed to calm her down a little.

"So let's see...you're playing D&D," Adam smiled, holding up his hand and beginning to count on his fingers, "You're probably making straight A's already, knowing you..."

"Haha, uhhhh...we'll see," Mila laughed sheepishly. She was doing pretty well in her classes so far, it was true.

"And...?" Adam finished, holding up a third finger as he raised an eyebrow across the table. "Anything else fun?"

Mila felt herself starting to blush. There *wasn't* really anything else. She basically just put her headphones on, went to class, took diligent notes, put her headphones back on, and went straight back to her dorm room, where she was free to dissolve into her fantasy worlds. In fact, she hadn't even really been playing D&D with anyone, since she hadn't worked up the courage to ask other people to join her. She knew that Adam wasn't meaning to put her on the spot like this, but that's what it felt like. She hated that she couldn't control the reddening of her face.

"I...ehh...heheh...not really," she replied, trying to mask her embarrassing answer with an apologetic little smile. Adam didn't seem to mind in the least, though, and he blinked a couple times, seeming to notice her self-consciousness, and taking pity on her.

“Hey, hey...there’s nothing wrong with chilling out for a bit!” he laughed, dropping his hand.

“Taking a full load of classes, adjusting to college life...god, I didn’t even know where I was the first, like 3 weeks, haha! I felt like I was staying in a hotel or something.”

“Me too!” exclaimed Mila, nodding vociferously. “Like...I would wake up and have to remember that I wasn’t at home anymore. Haha, no one to make me breakfast...”

“No one nagging at me to get up,” added Adam, grinning.

“No one saying I’m gonna be late if I don’t...if I don’t, uh...” continued Mila.

“Get your butt in gear?” offered Adam. “Or, haha, at least, that’s what my mom always used to say.”

“Oh your mom!” sighed Mila. She had already started to forget how nervous she was. “How’s she doing? And your dad?”

“Oh they’re both great,” replied Adam, drinking down the rest of his water. “You know them – total definition of that old married couple that isn’t even that old yet. I miss em’, buuuuut...haha, well I guess it’s nice to not be in the middle of their little hissy fits.”

“I always thought it was sooo cute when they’d argue,” Mila laughed. “Trying to one-up each other...so funny!”

“Haha yeah, unless you’re around it 24/7!” exclaimed Adam, “But no...no they’re doing great. And your mom? How’s she doing?”

“She’s fine too,” Mila nodded. Her dad wasn’t in her life, and hadn’t been ever since she was a young girl. “At first she was calling me a bunch, kinda...you know, all anxious.”

“Awww,” murmured Adam.

“But actually it was kinda all right,” Mila continued, swirling the ice around in her glass, “Because...uh, I was really anxious too. The mindsets sorta went hand-in-hand, haha. But that was like a month ago. She’s, uhm...chilled out a little since then.”

“Well hopefully you have too?” asked Adam kindly. “Not too anxious with all the change?”

“I...uhhhhahahahaha,” laughed Mila awkwardly, blushing again. But it was all ok, because Adam was laughing too, sympathetically.

“Ahhhhahahahaha well, heh, it’s...haha, it’s all right!” he continued kindly. “Sometimes I...uhm, you know...have moments when I’m not entirely sure of myself.”

"Oh please!" burst out Mila, feeling emboldened by the compliment she was about to lay on him, "You!? Come on Adam, if...if *you're* feeling insecure, then someone like *me* has no hope!"

"Whaaaat? Mila, don't say that," replied Adam earnestly, shaking his head. Mila wondered whether her compliment to him was actually more of an obvious put-down to herself...and an unattractive one at that. She fumbled to try and right the ship.

"I...I just mean, heh, you know...like I'm shy, right?" she chuckled, grinning toothily, "And kinda...reclusive and stuff. But, uhm...not to sound like a stalker or anything but, sometimes I see your pictures on Facebook and –"

"Oh GOD, not those!" laughed Adam, leaning back in his chair and rolling his eyes. "I TOLD those idiots at the frat house that it was a bad idea to be taking pictures when there was...shall we say...a little underage drinking going on."

"Oh! Haha I...I wasn't really talking about *those* specifically," Mila said quickly, "Just...you know...just a bunch of the other ones, you know, with you going out, hanging out with a bunch of cool people, having a nice time."

"Yeah...yeah, well, it's uhm..." said Adam, obviously trying to downplay his popularity, "It's been fun so far, yeah." He paused, apparently stuck, and Mila felt helpless. She had dug him into this hole.

"But I bet you're making better grades than me, huh?" he managed to say, winking at her.

"Noooo, no you're smart!" she giggled, blushing.

"Not as smart as you, Miss-I-Stressed-Out-Because-I-Got-Under-1500-On-My-SAT," Adam chided.

"Hey! Don't bring that up!" complained Mila, laughing as she waved him off. In doing so, her hand brushed his across the table, and Mila felt a surge of electricity go through her. She was sure he had noticed it...hadn't he?!

"So..." asked the waiter, who had been standing unseen next to the table for several moments, "Have you all been here before?"

Both Mila and Adam turned to look at the waiter, surprised, and they both looked back at each other and grinned sheepishly.

A little while later, after their dishes had come, and they had both eaten enough to resume their regular conversation, Mila finally worked up the courage to ask Adam about D&D. She didn't quite know why she was feeling so nervous around bringing it up, since they had used to play together so often. But as their conversation had continued, Mila began to get the distinct sense

that maybe Adam wasn't actually all that into D&D anymore. He hadn't said anything outright about it yet, but...well, it was just a feeling she was getting. But she had initiated the exchange around D&D, after all, and Mila was beginning to feel like if she didn't bring it up, then it would just look like she had used the pretext of D&D to basically go on a date with him...and that was the last thing she wanted him to think.

"So!" she began, putting her fork down briefly, "D&D! Uhhh..."

She blanked, and didn't know where to go from there. Fortunately, though, Adam was already nodding his head and answering. His right hand reached for his pocket:

"Oh! Yeah, yeah, about that, I was gonna tell you earlier, I found —"

"Everything alright over here?" asked the waiter pleasantly, coming up to the table.

"Oh yeah, totally," nodded Adam, taking his hand back out of his pocket as he leaned back in his chair. "Really, really good, haha — I just wolfed it all down!"

"And you, ma'm?" asked the waiter.

"It's...yeah, it's really good too," Mila replied. Adam had essentially inhaled his pasta, but she was still only about half-done with hers. She didn't get the sense that he was rushing her or anything, but she still wanted to speed up a little. And so, she rolled a particularly large forkfull of pasta and plopped it into her mouth, making her cheeks bulge a little.

"So...oh yeah, D&D!" Adam said, and his hand went back to his pocket again. But just then, Mila saw something change in his face, and his hand went back onto the table. He was looking slightly over her head at something. Mila was about to turn around to see what he was looking at when she heard a loud, feminine voice that startled her so much that she nearly choked on her food.

"Adam!!" cried the voice, "Ohmygod heeeeyyyy!!"

The owner of the voice strode into Mila's view, sidling right up to their table — it was a gorgeous blond girl...who looked to be some sort of athlete because of how tall and in-shape she looked, and she went straight for Adam, leaning in to give him a lingering hug. Adam halfheartedly returned the favor, laughing awkwardly as he did so.

"Heheh, uhhh, heyyy Claire!" he chuckled.

"I didn't know you came here!" Claire exclaimed, leaning on the table with her knuckles. Mila saw that her arms looked toned and strong...and she was wearing a lot of bracelets and rings as well, to go along with her stylish white top and designer jeans shorts, purposefully tattered at

the bottom. Her face was well-formed, with bright blue eyes, and her tanned skin looked delectable. An alluring waterfall of blond hair completed the picture. This girl was *hot*.

"Well...ehaha, I don't really come here much," Adam replied, glancing over at Mila. "Uhhh, this is my friend Mila, from high school. Mila, this is Claire."

Claire turned to look at Mila, and even though the bright smile never left the girl's face, Mila saw the bright blue eyes scan her up and down for a few moments, before finally blinking and extending her hand. That was all Mila needed to know that this girl looked down on her.

"Hiiii Mila, nice to *meet* you!" Claire smiled artificially, while her pleasant voice carried something of a forced effort. Clearly, she didn't see Mila as anything close to a threat. As if to prove this exact point, right after shaking Mila's hand, Claire straightened up, went around behind Adam, and snaked her arm around his chest, so that her hand was resting right on his pectoral muscle.

"So you knew this hunk in high school, huh?" grinned Claire, starting to scratch Adam's chest, "Tell me, was he a late bloomer, or did he always look like this?"

"Eheh...ignore her, Mila," chuckled Adam awkwardly, trying to brush Claire's arm off his chest. It took some doing, though, because she wasn't letting go. "She likes to stir the pot."

"I sure do!" Claire laughed, holding on for a few more seconds before finally relenting. "Haha, what's the matter, soccer star? Am I too much for you?"

Claire spread her legs apart confidently and struck a playful double-biceps pose. Mila's eyes popped as she saw Claire's muscles rise up. Not only was she gorgeous, but she was ripped as well!

"Claire...is a swimmer," Adam informed Mila, smiling across the table as he rolled his eyes, "And she's been going on and on about how she's stronger than me. Haha, I don't think so, Claire...but keep lifting those weights and we'll see."

"Oh we *will* see, Adam," Claire laughed, sticking her tongue into the inside of her mouth as she popped her biceps, one by one, and then turned to walk off. "Haahaha, aaaanyway, nice meeting you, uhm...ha, yeah, nice meeting you," she continued, apparently having already forgotten Mila's name, "And *I* will see *you* at the banquet this weekend," she added, pointing at Adam and making her long, manicured finger do a little circle in the air as it pointed at him.

"Mmmhm, yep, see you then!" Adam replied, waving goodbye. A few seconds of silence passed, during which Mila just sat there, a little shell-shocked, while Adam looked past her, watching Claire's shapely ass bob and weave in the swimmer's wake. Mila could feel the hot color rushing into her face. Was Claire...Adam's *girlfriend*!? Or, if she wasn't...was she *trying* to be?? Mila was in totally uncharted territory right now, and the last thing she wanted was to learn that she was somehow going to be competing against that girl for Adam's affections.

'But I'm not competing against anyone for anything,' she reminded herself miserably, 'I'm...I'm not even trying to go out with him! We're just hanging out, that's all...'

A moment later, Adam seemed to snap out of something and he blinked his eyes, shaking his head as his eyes returned to Mila.

"Hahaha so...yeeeeeahhhh, Claire's a piece of work," he laughed amiably, "Like I said, always stirring the pot."

"She seems...ehah, like a lot of fun!" Mila replied, trying her hardest to smile.

"Hmmmm, fun?" chuckled Adam, "Is that what you'd call it?"

"Well...she's, um...she's very pretty," offered Mila, returning to twirling her pasta. She was making a purposeful attempt to just keep making conversation, while at the same time fishing for information on Adam's relationship with Claire.

"Yeah...she is," Adam responded truthfully, "But with Claire...heh, how to put it...it's always like one big competition, you know? Like it's impossible to chill – no down time. You're always on your toes, trying to one-up her, or else she's gonna be one-upping you. Does that make any sense?"

"Mhm," nodded Mila, chewing her pasta, "Sounds...exciting!"

"Does it?" laughed Adam, arching an eyebrow. "Sounds kinda exhausting to me. And if I spend too much time around Claire, I...haha, I *totally* get exhausted."

Mila didn't know if there was some sort of sexual innuendo in there somewhere, but she decided to not even pursue it. It didn't seem like Adam was dating this girl – surely he would've mentioned that by now, and in any case he was being pretty frank about his reservations about her. Mila felt momentarily comforted. Still, though, the fact that Adam was on casual, flirtatious terms with a girl that hot reminded Mila how different his life was from hers. She barely hung out with anyone at all, and here Adam was, casually exchanging barbs with all these hot athlete girls at athletic banquets and...and on and on.

"Glad you could meet her, though," smiled Adam, "Gives you a window into the kind of nonsense I have to put up with all the time. College athletes are a...a lot of times, they're a certain *type* of person..."

"And what's that?" asked Mila.

“Waaaaaay too confident!” laughed Adam. “They were, like, stars in high school, and they’ve all grown up way too quickly, and they’re peaking when they’re like, 18 or 20, and then it’s just...the rest of their life is downhill from there, haha!”

“You’re not that way,” said Mila quietly, finishing up the rest of her pasta.

“No, I...well...at least...uhm...I hope I’m not,” replied Adam, momentarily stumbling over himself a little bit.

“You’re not,” Mila repeated.

“Well...thank god for that!” was all Adam could say, his face twisted up in an amiable smile. Mila smiled back at him, and lowered her head to finish her last bite of pasta. She knew that Adam was downplaying how much he enjoyed hanging out with his hot athlete friends. It was sweet of him...really, it was. Mila appreciated it. But even still, it hurt a little bit to know that he felt like he needed to make that effort with her. Was it really so obvious that she had a gigantic crush on him?

‘Of course it’s obvious,’ Mila thought to herself, ‘But he’s so nice and sweet that he’s trying really hard to not make it painful for me. But I can take it...it’s worth it, just to hang out with him, to spend time with him.’

Adam was looking around a bit awkwardly, and had apparently decided to fill the lull in the conversation by lifting his arms up, arching his back, and stretching against his chair. As he did so, Mila could see his developed arms.

“Your...uh, your arms are looking...uhm, pretty good there,” she managed to say, hardly believing that the words were coming out of her mouth. “Even though you...um, even though you’re a soccer player, haha!”

“Ha! That’s what Claire always says,” Adam laughed, “Uhhh, that is...about being a soccer player and not having strong arms. She thinks she’s got stronger arms, but she’s wrong.” Adam flexed his own bicep, which sprang up impressively. Mila looked at it and delighted in being able to openly express her appreciation.

“Soccer players use their arms all the time for balance, pivoting, pushing off people,” Adam was explaining, “And so our coaches make us train arms too.”

“Well, I can tell,” declared Mila. Adam grinned a bit sheepishly, flexed it one more time, and then put it away. Mila didn’t think he could have been any more adorable if he had tried.

After a bit more fun, easy conversation, they paid their bill and got up to leave. Mila had quite forgotten that a storm had been brewing when they had walked into the restaurant, so she was surprised when they opened the door to an absolute downpour. The wind was whipping around

for good measure, and even though they were standing under the restaurant awning, they were getting sprayed with the force of the rain.

“Oh! God!” exclaimed Adam. “I forgot it was about to rain!”

“Me too!” Mila added, raising her voice above the sound of the rain and the wind.

“Where did you park?” asked Adam, nearly shouting.

“Over there, around the corner!” called Mila.

“I parked the opposite way!” Adam responded. “How about this? How about I run to my car, drive up here, pick you up, and drop you off at your car?”

“Oh...uhh...ok!” Mila nodded, smiling, again delighted by Adam’s thoughtfulness. Even though she knew he didn’t mean it in a romantic way, she loved how he made her feel like a lady.

“Will just be a sec!” Adam called, and then bounded away into the darkness. Mila stood there waiting, feeling the strength of the storm seeming to increase against her. The wind blew even harder, and the rain was coming down so hard that she actually had to take a few steps back to avoid getting soaked. It had been a wonderful night with Adam so far, and they still hadn’t even played any D&D yet! Despite the wind and rain, Mila felt warmed down to her toes. She was proud of herself, managing that interaction with Claire without too much of a fuss, and –

Honk *Honk*

Two light taps of a horn made Mila jerk her head up. There was Adam, waiting for her in his red sedan...the same one he had always had. Gearing herself up and grinning ear to ear, she made a run for it, jumping into his passenger side and shutting the door as fast as she could.

“God damn it’s coming down, isn’t it?!” laughed Adam incredulously, “Never seen anything like it!”

“Yeah! But...like, it’s weird,” Mila remarked, suddenly realizing something.

“What’s that?” asked Adam, as he confidently navigated his car to the parking lot on the other corner.

“There’s no lightning,” Mila said. “No thunder...when it rains this hard here, especially with all this wind, it’s always a thunderstorm. But this is...just, like a rainstorm.”

“Yeeeeeah, yeah, you’re right!” exclaimed Adam, nodding. “That IS weird. Hmmmm...very odd...let’s see...your car...your car...don’t tell me, don’t tell me...there! *There* it is!”

“Haha, you got it,” laughed Mila, charmed by his memory.

“White Volvo...can’t get more classic than that!” declared Adam. “Ok, so...D&D...we going to your place or my place?”

“I...well the board’s at my place,” Mila answered, realizing how much more she’d want to play at Adam’s place.

“Alright, then that settles it!” laughed Adam. “A dark and stormy night of cozy D&D at your place! I’ll just follow you, then, if that works.”

“A-Actually,” Mila said, reddening in embarrassment, “Let me just give you the address. I drive, like...suuuuper slow, and I’m gonna be going even slower in this...uhm, weather.”

“Haha, ok, whatever you want,” Adam chuckled. “If I get there first I’ll just wait in the car.”

“You WILL get there first,” Mila assured him with a grim smile.

A minute later, she was in her car, anxiously looking behind her as she backed up. Orange and red lights bled and melded together as they ran down her windows. When she finally put her car in “drive” and started moving, Adam was already well on his way there. And even though Mila was gripping the steering wheel extra-hard this trip, as the rain bashed against her windshield in sheets, she felt warm and cozy knowing that Adam would be waiting in his car for her at her apartment.

Chapter 3

"Wow, so...this is *cute*!" Adam exclaimed amiably, looking around as Mila shut her door behind him.

"Heh, well it's...it's just my little nest," Mila replied, turning the lock. She took a couple extra moments to stare down at her doorknob, as her wet hair dripped onto the metal. Her stomach lurched uncomfortably. Why had she brought him back here to her place?! Why hadn't she suggested they go to his apartment? It was all well and good to daydream about Adam actually being *there*, in her living room, but now that he was actually here, Mila felt a crushing wave of anxiety threaten to overwhelm her. What would he think of her place? Did she have nerdy, tacky taste? Would he feel trapped? Did it smell ok in here!?

"Well it's totally *you*!" Adam declared, going up to the posters Mila had on her wall. "Mhmm, loving the Studio Ghibli poster...and with the Japanese letters too! Is that, uhm...hold on, wait, let me guess...is that *My Neighbor Totoro*?"

"Yeah it is!" smiled Mila, feeling a strange rush of reassurance. She hadn't expected him to guess correctly...and in any case, he wasn't making any faces, or seeming like he was straining to stay positive. She figured that meant her place probably smelled ok.

"And of course you've got *The Hobbit* here," Adam continued, going on to the next one. Mila stole a glance at his butt, which was looking quite shapely in those stylish jeans he had on. She felt a pang of longing, but easily held herself back, almost laughing internally at the brazenness of her arousal.

"I actually thought, uhm, that the first two movies were pretty good!" Mila said, "And I really liked that poster there – Gandalf next to Bag End, you know? With the dark clouds on the horizon. Like, calming and ominous at the same time."

"I totally get it," nodded Adam appreciatively, moving on to yet another poster. Mila was beginning to think that he was just humoring her now, but she played along regardless. "Aaaaand it goes without saying that no Mila residence would be complete without some stylish anime!"

"Heh, well you know me," Mila chuckled, trying to sound casual, "I love my anime."

"What's this of?" asked Adam, stepping closer to look at the image of a strong, spiky-haired young man staring intently at the viewer. "I don't think I'm familiar with this one."

"Oh yeah, it's...kind of obscure," Mila answered, blushing a little. "It's *Kongō Banchō*, by Nakaba Suzuki. I really like his style." She had just remembered the four beers she had in the fridge, and was looking for an opportunity to offer one to Adam, so she could drink one too. Her nerves were starting to get to her.

“Huh, cool...” pondered Adam, looking at the poster, “I like it too.”

A few silent moments passed, and Mila began to feel increasingly anxious. She didn’t know what to think – did Adam think things were getting awkward already? Or was he just cool checking her place out?

‘He’s just chilling, Mila...just chilling,’ she told herself desperately. That reminded her of the beers, and she spoke up, a little louder and more abruptly than she had intended to:

“Hey! Uhhh, I got a few beers in the fridge! Want one?”

Adam turned around from the wall to face her. His eyebrows had gone up, and Mila had to deal with the horrible thought that she had just made an awful mistake. Was it suggestive, bringing up drinking with him? Was it basically the same thing as her saying, ‘Hey let’s get rid of the inhibition so I can make a pass at you?’ She felt herself tensing up inside. This kind of anxiety couldn’t go on for much longer without her visibly showing it in her appearance and behavior.

“Hmmm, a beer...” Adam mused out loud, putting his hand up to his chin. “Haha, you know, it’s funny...I know we’re in college and everything, but I...I haven’t actually had a drink yet since I’ve been here.”

“Oh...y-you...really?” stammered Mila, getting red in the face. Now she felt like some of delinquent; and she was shocked that someone as sociable and popular as Adam hadn’t been drinking. Sure, they were both technically “underage,” but no one really paid attention to those rules, especially in college.

“Haha yeah,” chuckled Adam, almost apologetically, “And it hasn’t been because I’ve, you know...turned into some kind of puritan or something, haha...I just, I guess with all the soccer practice and training and all, I haven’t really had the stomach for it.”

“Oh right, right, all your training!” exclaimed Mila, nodding her head quickly. “Haha wow, I forgot...you’re probably on a strict, uhm...you know, diet or whatever, especially since you said your uhhh...your season’s about to start. And here I am, trying to make you drink! I’m sorry, Adam, forget I ever said anything.”

“Haha, no, no, it’s not that big of a deal, actually,” he laughed good-naturedly, holding his hand up. “Our season doesn’t start until next week and...well, even though our coach warned us that he better not be hearing about us going out to bars, I think...heheh, well, this is a little different. We’re just here at your apartment!”

“Y-Yeah...yeah...” Mila replied. She was just going along with whatever he was saying at this point. Being reminded of Adam’s athleticism had caused her eyes to go up and down his body again. God, he was just so...so nicely *put together*...such nice arms...tasty muscles...broad

shoulders...she badly wanted to see his bare legs, but his jeans prevented that...still, though, she could see the outline of his perfect butt...a big butt, especially for his frame...she felt herself getting a little weak in the knees, as she felt a tingle of electricity between her legs.

“And anyway, what better way to pop my, uhhh...my alcohol cherry than with Mila Rainsly over a nice little game of D&D?” Adam finished, smiling broadly. Mila felt a wave of euphoria pass over her, and she matched his broad smile with an even broader one of her own. Her torso jiggled as she felt herself starting to laugh.

“Hahaha...al...haha...*alcohol cherry!*?” she exclaimed, clutching her sides.

“Ha! I know, I know, I’m a big dork,” Adam replied, nodding his head self-deprecatingly through his smile.

“No! I just...heh...takes one to know one, I guess,” Mila laughed. She had been trying to reassure Adam that, in fact, he wasn’t a dork, but her words got caught and tangled up in her throat, and she ended up just going for the humorous approach. It seemed to have worked, because Adam was laughing with her now.

“Well we *are* playing D&D on a Friday night,” he quipped. A few seconds of silence passed by, during which he appeared to realize that Mila could have taken his comment as a sort of backhanded dig at her, so he quickly added, “And I wouldn’t have it any other way. Nerds for life, right?”

“Haha, totally!” she laughed. There had been no reason for Adam to worry – Mila was still basking in the relief that her beer offer hadn’t fallen flat, and in her excitement that all of this was actually happening.

“So...I’ll warn you,” she grinned, going into the kitchen, “I’ve only got High Life...nothing fancy.”

“You say that like I’m gonna care,” chuckled Adam, walking into the kitchen behind her. “I’m, like...the opposite of a beer connoisseur.”

“Me too,” nodded Mila, opening the fridge and fishing out two bottles of the golden beer. “And I hope you don’t think I’m some kind of...I don’t know, alcoholic or something, haha. I literally just bought this six-pack on a whim the other day, no idea why.”

“How’d you buy it?” asked Adam, accepting the cold bottle from Mila.

“The beer? Oh...haha, it’s easy,” she laughed. “Jay’s Package Store doesn’t really check ID’s.”

“Huh, imagine that!” Adam grinned, looking impressed. “I think you’ve got a hang of this ‘college thing’ a lot more than I do, Mila!”

“Oh nooo, no, that’s not true!” she replied immediately, blushing. “You’re the popular one – and I’m just...the, uhm...the lucky one who’s your friend.”

“Aww, you’re too sweet,” Adam smiled. He held up his bottle. “How about we drink to that, huh? Still friends!”

“Still friends!” repeated Mila happily, clinking her bottle into his. In her heart, she wanted more...so much more...but for the moment, she was actually able to shove down her amorous desires and just enjoy the time she was spending with Adam. Two days ago, would she have thought that it would be possible that she would be hanging out with him, in her apartment, on a Friday night, drinking beer and playing D&D!? No...no, of course not...and so she didn’t have much trouble reminding herself to savor this time, without letting it be tainted by the knowledge that they would always just be friends.

“Oh wow! God, this board has had an upgrade since I saw it last!” exclaimed Adam a few minutes later, when Mila brought out her own customized D&D board and laid it out on her dining room table.

“Heheh, well I’ve been getting more and more into it,” replied Mila, blushing, partially from pride, and partially from embarrassment, “Just kinda as a...um...a pet project...and stuff.”

“Just look at all this!” continued Adam, sitting down in a chair and admiring the whole layout, “You’ve made a perfect little medieval village! You’ve got the tavern...the blacksmith...”

“Haha, yeah...” Mila grinned sheepishly.

“The armory...the monastery...the castle...” continued Adam, “And a little forest over here. Some mountains over there...Haha, geez Mila, this is amazing! How did you make all this stuff!?”

“3D printer,” she answered quietly, feeling her face get even hotter with her blush. She hadn’t expected Adam to be this impressed. “And the scenery on the, uh, on the board itself I just painted myself...you know, the grass, the roads, oh, and the tar pit over here in the corner...haha, thought that would be a fun obstacle to navigate, or maybe even there’s something we end up needing, like a...I don’t know, a key or something, that’s stuck in there...or whatever...”

She finished her explanation feeling slightly lame, like she had started strong but then steadily deflated as she spoke. But a quick look up at Adam told her that, once again, she had no reason for feeling such anxiety. He was nodding his head over and over, his wide eyes going around the whole board, drinking it in, and clearly enjoying it.

“Oh yeah...yeah, this is...this is incredible, Mila,” he declared, raising his eyes up to look at her across the table. “It’s really taking me back, haha! Back to middle school...early high school, when we played all the time.”

“It is!?” Mila asked, leaning forward and nearly knocking her beer over.

“Totally!” Adam smiled. “Haha, you’re making me wonder why on earth I started doing all this other stuff...soccer, football, parties with all those boring people...haha, this totally beats all that!”

“Aww but you...you, uhm...ehheheh, well, thanks!” Mila stammered. She didn’t know what else to say. Was he just being nice? It would be like Adam, to say all these things to make her feel good, to make her feel at ease. It must have been obvious how nervous and awkward she was...but even if he was just saying this stuff, it sure sounded nice coming out of his mouth. Mila resolved just to run with it, and enjoy it.

“Ok so...characters!” Adam said, rubbing his hands together, as he looked down at the assembled 3D-printed little figures, “What’ve we got here? Let’s see...an elf...that’s a dwarf...some kind of warrior...a human, maybe?”

“Mhm, that’s a ranger,” Mila explained, “And...uhm, you’ve got your mage here, and then a huntress, a sorceress...”

“Oooo, she’s pretty tall compared to the other ones!” remarked Adam, picking up the sorceress and examining her closely.

“Heh, yeah, I...I kinda wanted to make her that way,” Mila murmured, “I always thought there was something cool about a big tall powerful lady...like the White Witch from the Chronicles of Narnia...even though she was evil, haha...you know what I mean?”

“Yeah...yeah I think so,” Adam replied, though Mila felt that perhaps he was just humoring her. He put the sorceress back down. “And a few more...damn, Mila! So many to choose from! Do you have a preference for who you’re gonna be?”

“I...well, maybe the sorceress, actually,” Mila smiled. “Since I’m pretty tiny in real life, and why not indulge the, uh...the fantasy of being bigger, right?”

“Haha sounds good!” Adam laughed good-naturedly, “So you wanna be bigger, then?”

“Oh! Haha not, like...*actually*,” Mila backpedaled quickly, “Just, you know...in the fantasy world.”

“Really?” asked Adam, leaning forward over the table a little as he scrutinized her with feigned seriousness, “You sure about that? You don’t want to be one of those amazon warriors from the Wonder Woman movies who just totally hulks out on the bad guys?”

“Ehhhh, I don’t know much about Wonder Woman,” Mila admitted timidly, “I’m kind of a Marvel girl, remember?”

“Hahaha riiiiight, right!” laughed Adam, leaning back away from the table in his chair, “I forgot about that.”

“But now that you mention it, yeah, I guess it would be cool to be a little taller,” Mila continued, glancing down wistfully at the sorceress figurine. As soon as she had spoken, though, she felt a wave of self-consciousness. ‘God,’ she thought, ‘I sound so pitiful.’

“But...but this is the body I’ve got!” she added, smiling as she looked up and gestured down to her figure, speaking louder and trying to rally herself. It seemed to work, because Adam was chuckling appreciatively.

“You look good, Mila,” he said genuinely, “Really, you do.”

“Aww you’re just saying that to be nice,” she smiled dismissively, waving him away as she took another swig of her beer. Adam didn’t reply; he just shrugged a little with his lips pursed in a kind smile, as if to say, ‘Well, what’s wrong with being nice?’ Mila didn’t know what to make of his reaction...whether he was admitting that he was just hummoring her, or whether he had just decided not to further engage her insecurities. The two possibilities clashed in her head, and she pushed them all away, taking another healthy swig of beer. She was so tired of always stressing out about all this stuff. Jesus, she had Adam here – why not just enjoy it?!

“Ok so...so yeah, I’ll be the sorceress,” she continued, barreling ahead, feeling the brave kick of the alcohol in her brain, “And how about you?”

“Hmmm, good question,” mused Adam, looking from figure to figure. “So many good choices here...haha, look at the detail on these! You carved little runes in the monk’s staff...the knight has a little kerchief wrapped around his neck...”

“From his courtly-love princess in a faraway land,” explained Mila proudly.

“Haha of course!” laughed Adam. “And look – you even gave the ranger a perfect little green cloak...with a hood and everything!”

“Heh, yeah, I made that out of this, like...special fabric I got at the store,” Mila replied. “It kinda took me a minute to get the dimensions right, since I can’t sew for shit...I-I mean...yeah, I can’t sew.” Mila had stopped herself for a moment after saying “shit,” since she usually didn’t use

that kind of language. But she was drinking a little, and was feeling more relaxed by the second. Why not let loose a little? Besides, Adam obviously didn't mind.

"Well you could've fooled me!" he declared, picking up the ranger and examining it closely. "This thing fits him perfectly!"

"Yeah, it's supposed to be a waterproof cloak that protects him from the rain, the wind...you know, the elements," Mila nodded. "Which is important because he's outside all the time, snooping around the dark forests, carrying out all kinds of...um, all kinds of..."

"Missions?" offered Adam helpfully.

"Yeah! Missions and...you know, reconnaissance and stuff," Mila continued. She leaned slightly into the table, looking across to Adam. She knew he hadn't asked for the backstory, but he really did seem to enjoy her D&D set, and after all, she *had* spent a lot of time on it. So why not show it off a bit? This was Adam, after all! She didn't need to hold back – he wanted to hear it. She shoved down the little chattering, misgiving voices making a racket in her mind, and plowed on ahead.

"I actually have this whole backstory for the ranger," she explained excitedly. "Like, he's a...well he's kind of like Aragorn, from Lord of the Rings."

"Haha remember, it's me, Mila," chuckled Adam, taking a swig from his beer and admiring the bubbles in his bottle before looking back at her humorously. "I know who Aragorn is."

"Oh, pssssh, of course, silly me!" she exclaimed, smacking herself on the forehead with the palm of her hand, "And I...uhh...yeah...what was I saying?"

Adam laughed and held up the ranger figurine.

"Oh right! Ha, so...the ranger's kinda like Aragorn," continued Mila, getting a little red in the face, both from the alcohol and her stumbling over her words. But she was still enjoying herself. "In that he's...well, he's technically in line to be king, but he's chosen exile instead, because the land is ruled by some sort of evil force that's keeping him from the throne, you know, that's um...that's ruling in his place. And so he sneaks around, dispatching, uhh, y'know, bad guys here and there...hangs out in dark taverns in the corner...mysterious character...that kind of stuff."

"Well now I've gotta be this guy," Adam announced, placing the ranger down next to the sorceress, "With a backstory like that."

"What? Oh, n-no, no I...I wasn't trying to box you in," said Mila quickly. "You can be anyone you want!"

"I know," smiled Adam, tapping the figurine on the head, "And I'm choosing the ranger. He seems cool."

Mila stared down at the two figurines, both of them standing next to each other. Her sorceress rose up, tall and proud, clothed in an orange tunic and orange felt boots, with her brown hair tied up in two large, stylish pig-tails. Mila had wanted to give her a slightly-playful, girlish look, designed to disguise her true power. She reasoned that, in the dangerous world of her D&D landscape, most characters would want to "fly under the radar," so to speak. But, of course, her character could only disguise herself so much, being as tall as she was. Especially compared to Adam's cute little ranger, she looked *huge*. The ranger, though, just like the sorceress, had enormous power potential, and Mila had specifically constructed his figurine to look "ordinary." Being a D&D purist, she wanted the real drama to take place within the game itself. She hadn't wanted to draw too much attention to the artwork on the figurines.

'Besides,' she thought to herself, as she looked down at the two figures, standing side by side, 'I'm not much of an artist anyway.' Still, though, she couldn't help but think that there was something about the way the sorceress and the ranger looked together...something that warmed her heart. It was the two of them – her and Adam – standing together, in a fantasy world, with all these obstacles and challenges in their way, with no one but each other to rely on.

'Us against the world,' Mila thought wistfully. But she suddenly registered that Adam had been talking, and she perked up and refocused her eyes on him, shaking her head slightly, like she was awaking from a trance.

"Uhhh...s-sorry, what were you saying?" she asked, a little frazzled. "I...heh, I kinda zoned out there for a second. Getting tipsy I guess..."

"You and me both!" laughed Adam, holding up his bottle and "cheersing" her again. They both took another long gulp, and once they had both swallowed, they looked across the table at each other, grinning. In an instant they burst into laughter.

"Whaaaaaat?" chortled Mila, feeling her face go red. "What were you saaaaaying?"

"I were saying..." joked Adam, with purposefully bad grammar, "That we should roll some dice to determine the, uhm...the...oh what are they called again?"

"The ability scores?" Mila offered, turning her head slightly askew at Adam, like she was interrogating the fact that he had forgotten such basic terminology. Internally, she actually felt a pang of sadness, even though she was able to ignore it and pass it off as the alcohol toying with her emotions. It really had been that long since he had played...he had moved on...to bigger and better things...

"Hey, hey, it's been a minute!" he replied, with feigned indignation. "But anyway, I...I uh..."

Mila looked down and saw that Adam had lowered his hand to his side, like he was about to put his hand in his pocket. That reminded her about dice...specifically, that special purple-glitter-resin 20-sided dice that she kept in her nightstand drawer...the dice they had both used dozens, probably hundreds of times, when they played back in middle school and early high school. Her heart thumped in her chest as she leapt up out of her chair.

"Wait, hold that thought!" she exclaimed. "I've...I've gotta go get something...you'll enjoy..."

Mila stumbled into her bedroom and opened her nightstand drawer. She couldn't believe that she hadn't thought this far ahead yet. Maybe she hadn't really believed that she could get Adam into her apartment. But he was here now, and now it was clear to her that they definitely needed to play with her special purple dice. It would bring back all those memories of that wonderful time when they had been best friends. After a little rummaging, Mila finally found it and closed her hand around its smooth, pointed edges. And then, without even thinking, she held her hand up close to her mouth and whispered into the die, almost like a prayer:

"Let him remember...please let him remember..."

Mila didn't even give herself time to feel pathetic or ridiculous because of this sudden, strange, and private gesture. She didn't really even know exactly what she meant by it, but she felt somehow that every second she lingered in her bedroom would dilute her intention. Wiping her mind clean, and taking a deep breath, she strolled back into the dining room, turning the die around and around in her hand behind her back. Adam smiled expectantly at her as she sat down.

"So, for the dice tonight," she began, her heart hammering away in her chest, "I thought we'd use...this."

She deposited the brilliant purple die down on the table.

"Look familiar?" she quipped, trying her hardest to sound casual. But her voice was shaking a little.

Adam blinked down at the die, and his mouth dropped open. Mila felt a flood of hot emotion rush over her. He recognized it!

"Oh my god..." he murmured, shaking his head as his mouth twitched into a grin, "I...this...Mila! Haha WOW, this is just...just too crazy!"

He picked the die up and examined it, turning it over and over in his hand, like he was seeing an old friend. Mila watched him, biting her lip and clenching her stomach, willing herself not to tear up. She hated how emotional this was making her feel, but at the same time, it was all for a good reason – it was because she was *happy*.

“Long time no see!” Adam laughed, glancing over at Mila before staring into the die again, holding it up to the light so that its opaque purple depths were illuminated. “God, how many times we rolled this guy together, huh?”

“I...I know,” Mila nodded, her voice sounding far away as she struggled not to choke up.

“So...” Adam continued, putting the die down on the table in front of him as he looked squarely at Mila, “You’re not gonna believe this, but...after I parked my car near Louie’s this afternoon, you know...I was walking up to the restaurant...and this is, like, just a minute before we met up...I looked down in the ivy by the sidewalk, and...something caught my eye.”

Adam reached into his pocket and pulled out something and put it down on the table next to Mila’s die. Mila’s mouth dropped open, and she felt her eyebrows creasing towards each other as she blinked blankly down at what she was seeing. It was another die...another 20-sided die...that looked *exactly* like hers.

Mila looked up at Adam, her eyes wide. “No...” she began, a little shakily, “No...no way...”

“I *know*, right!?” Adam chuckled, nodding earnestly. “Like...what are the odds? *Crazy* coincidence...haha, I actually thought that you were already at the restaurant and had, like, accidentally dropped it in the ivy on your way inside. I was gonna mention it to you, but...heh, well, we kinda got caught up in conversation and I was so glad to see you and I forgot to bring it up, until now.”

Mila looked back down at the dice, and she reached out and grabbed both of them, turning them around and around in her fingers, examining them closely. It was eerie how similar they were – she actually had to make a conscious effort to remind herself which one was the original. From the golden etchings of the numbers, to the ethereal purple glow, to the little deposits of glitter suspended inside...they looked *identical*.

“This is just...holy *shit*, this is crazy,” Mila muttered in amazement. “I wonder...eheh, damn...I wonder who dropped it there.”

“I mean, like, the *odds*,” Adam emphasized, gesturing with his hands, “The *odds* of someone just happening to drop a 20-sided die like *that* in the ivy, right in my path, on the night that you and I are gonna play D&D. And it’s not like they make a ton of dice like that!”

“No,” Mila replied, shaking her head, “They’re super-rare. I bought this one special off Ebay...ha, Ebay...the days before Amazon...”

“And I guess I just assumed...heh, yeah, now that I’m thinking about it, I just assumed it was yours,” Adam said, repeating himself. “But I guess...I guess not.”

The two of them shared an introspective moment of silence, as they stared down at the identical dice that Mila had put back on the table. Outside, the storm continued to rage, with torrents of rain coming down, and the wind whipping through the trees. Inside Mila's apartment, though, the two friends felt warm and cozy. The shock of this strange die had distracted Mila from her own insecurities, and the intimacy of the moment washed over her, making her feel as happy as she had felt in a long, long time.

"Well, it's ours now!" she laughed, breaking the silence. She pushed it over to Adam, as she took up her die in her hands. "And it'll make it easier for us to roll our ability scores – we can do them at the same time!"

"Perfect!" smiled Adam, scooping up his die. "So we roll first to determine...um...strength, right?"

"Haha, you're starting to remember!" teased Mila, swiping up her own die. The two of them started shaking the dice in their hands, with Adam blowing on his playfully for luck.

"C'mon!" he whispered to his die, loudly enough so that Mila could hear, "C'mon! Remember? Remember how you used to always give me high strength! Let's go...15 or higher!"

"Haha, that one doesn't remember!" laughed Mila, shaking her own die. "But this one does!"

"Heheh, I don't knowwww," replied Adam, cocking his head to the side, "I've got a funny feeling about this little guy here..."

"Alright so...we roll together..." said Mila.

"Together," nodded Adam. They smiled at each other, enjoying the moment.

"Ok," breathed Mila. She didn't know why, but her heart hadn't slowed down – instead, it had sped up. Something seemed to be hanging in the darkness above them...a strong sense of foreboding. It felt almost dangerous...and exciting.

"On three," she heard herself say. "One..."

"Two..." Adam added.

"THREE!"

Their voices echoed off the walls in unison as they rolled their dice. The sparkly purple plastic clattered down on the table...and both dice smacked directly into one another, in the middle of the table. Adam's settled down on a "1," and Mila's, teetering on the edge, rolled over into a "20."

In an instant, the room was lit up by a flash of brilliant white light. Both Adam and Mila shut their eyes tightly and instinctually lifted up their hands to shield their faces. An immense whooshing sound roared in their ears, and they both experienced the sensation of dropping off something, like they were stepping off a cliff and falling down into a deep and boundless chasm below. They were too shocked to make a sound.

And then, almost as soon as it had begun, it was over. With a sudden start, their apparent, catapulting movement came to an end. They both felt damp earth beneath them...damp grass. Something soft and cool was blowing into their faces...a cool, delicious wind. It smelled like they were outside. The only thing they could hear was each other's heavy, panting breathing. Neither of them had dared to open their eyes yet.

"A-Adam...!?" Mila spoke first. She was scared, and her trembling voice reflected this fear...but the strange thing was, her voice sounded deeper, fuller, larger. It was still certainly feminine, but just...*more* than it had been before.

"Mila?" Adam's voice came in response. "I'm...I'm here." He sounded shaken as well, and his voice was also different. There was no doubt that it was him, but his voice was somehow smaller...fainter. Mila had the sense that it came from somewhere below her.

She opened her eyes. She was standing on the edge of an immense forest of thick, gnarled trees that expanded off to her right for as far as she could see. To her left was a rich, verdant, green plain, dotted with the occasional pink and purple blotches of wildflowers. In the distance, beyond another array of gnarled trees, she could just make out the shapes of some pointed spires and thatched roofs...a village...and within it, in the distance, a huge stone structure with turreted battlements...a castle. The sky was overcast, and once again, Mila felt that cool breeze on her face. She raised up her hand to brush her hair out of her face, but she realized she didn't have to. Her hair was tied up in two pigtails behind her head. Looking down, Mila saw, with a sense of bewildered shock, that she was dressed in an orange tunic, with orange felt boots wrapped around her lower legs, reaching up to the middle of her shapely calves.

Not knowing what to think, her mind totally paralyzed, Mila turned to her left, in an attempt to seek out Adam. An ancient oak tree hung down low over her, low enough to where she could easily reach up and grab its branches. It occurred to Mila, in a strange and impromptu moment of musing, that this must have been a small tree...though it was odd that such a small tree would look so old. Weren't old trees usually much bigger? But her mind suddenly focused to a razor-sharp point as she saw something emerging slowly from around the oak's trunk...a tiny little person in a green hood...walking gingerly, cautiously. Mila felt herself tense up a little at this new form, but she relaxed almost immediately once she realized how small this person was compared to her.

And then, the figure threw back his hood, and Mila gasped. It was Adam. The two of them stood stock-still, gaping at each other, completely stunned. Adam's head was no higher than Mila's hips.

Chapter 4

For what seemed like a very long time, neither of them spoke. The only sound that passed between them was the light whisper of the cool breeze as it dipped and bent through the gnarled oak tree branch that hung over them...or, more accurately, that hung over Adam. Mila's head rose up as tall as a good number of the branches, even taller than a few of them. During this lengthy silence, both of them opened their mouths, attempting to say something, but nothing came out. It was clear, after a while, that both of them seemed to be biding their time, waiting for the moment when they would snap out of this dream and appear back in Mila's dining room.

'Did we...did we both get knocked out or something?' Mila thought desperately to herself, 'Like, did...we get struck by lightning? Or maybe just me? Am I...am I...*dead*!?'

She felt herself starting to panic at the thought, and she could feel her heart beginning to race in her chest. But in the midst of this trajectory of panic, something made her pause. Everything was *too real*. The breeze, the slightly moist, heavy feel of the air, the overcast sky, the woody creaks of the tree branches around her, and off to her right in the immense forest that extended out to the horizon as far as she could see. But most of all, it was the reality of *Adam* in front of her that made her feel like this couldn't be the mirage of some terrible death-throes. Even though he only stood as high as her hip, it was definitely *him* – there was no mistaking that youthful, precious face, that short, sandy-brown hair, and those bright blue eyes. And despite the fact that Adam's face was etched with fear (an emotion Mila had never seen him express before), it was precisely this fear that conveyed to her the reality of the situation. Of *course* he was scared...just like she was...because they were both actually HERE, wherever "here" was.

"So you...you're feeling ok?" ventured Adam, who was obviously making a valiant attempt to keep the tremor out of his voice. "You're alright?"

"Y-Yeah...I'm...I'm ok," Mila responded unsteadily, not able to disguise how shaken she felt. The deeper, more resonant sound of her voice sounded strange in her ears, especially compared to the relative softness of Adam's voice. Mila didn't like the discrepancy, just as she didn't like the fact that she was almost twice as tall as he was. She couldn't help but think that, if only the sizes were reversed, she would feel a lot more reassured.

"Okay, well...there's that, then," Adam replied, nodding in encouragement. He looked around them, first at the dark forest that stretched out to their right, then out at the wildflower-dotted field to their left, and then finally to the distant thatched roofs and turrets of some sort of town on the horizon. "So I don't...uhm, know where we are or why we're...like this...but at least...at least we're not hurt, right!"

Mila stepped gingerly over to the trunk of the ancient oak tree next to them. All of this was just too much...too much to handle, and in any case, she really didn't like looming over Adam like some kind of grotesque...monster, or something. She turned her back to the tree and then sank

down into a sitting position. At least this way, he was taller than her now, as she was staring straight into his chest.

“Light-headed?” Adam asked in a concerned voice, walking up to her.

“Kind of...I don’t know,” murmured Mila quietly. “I just...I just need to gather myself a little here. Catch my breath a little.”

“Heh, me too,” Adam chuckled, and much to Mila’s discouragement, he plopped down next to her against the tree trunk. Now she felt like a giant monster again – but Mila made a conscious effort to try not to fixate so much on these feelings. Besides, there was far more to occupy her mind than such negative thoughts. Another long silence passed between them, or at least it seemed long to Mila. In reality, it was actually less than a minute – but the sheer novelty of what had happened made time seem artificially elongated.

“So,” Adam said, speaking first again as his small hands chopped at the air, “Let’s...let’s get a few things straight, now that we know we’re both ok.”

“Alright,” nodded Mila, creasing her brow as she looked down at Adam. She felt a warm surge of affection for him. Despite whatever that had happened, Adam hadn’t lost a bit of his confident personality. He was taking charge.

“We were at your place, right?” Adam began, “Right after we ate dinner at that Italian place?”

“Yeah,” replied Mila, nodding her head again.

“And we were playing D&D?”

“Mhmm...”

“And then there were those two purple dice...we both had one...crazy coincidence?”

“Yes...” Mila was already starting to think that it wasn’t a coincidence at all, but she didn’t say anything else.

“And then we were rolling for our ability scores?”

“Right...and then – ”

“Then I got a 1, and...” He pointed up at Mila expectantly; their eyes met, and in that moment, Mila could tell that the immense size difference between the two of them was having at least some effect on him too. The way his eyes blinked when she looked down at him...it was like he was having to adjust himself. For an instant, he looked intimidated. But it was only an instant, and Mila remembered that it was her turn to speak now.

“A-And...And I rolled a 20!” she added excitedly, “And then –”

“Poof!” exclaimed Adam, miming an explosion with his two hands. “A big flash of white light...that’s what you saw too, right?”

“Yeah,” said Mila, “And then I was just...we were both just...”

“Here,” finished Adam. The breeze kicked up around them as they sat for a moment in silence, still processing the reality of what had happened.

“And I’m...I’m apparently a little dwarf now,” Adam chuckled, spreading his arms out wide as he looked up at Mila.

“You mean I’m a huge ugly giant now,” Mila responded immediately, hating how sullen she sounded but not being able to stop herself.

“A...what!? Milaaaaa,” chided Adam, reaching over to touch her bare arm. She shivered and shrank from his touch at first, since the feel of his small hand made her feel even more self-conscious than she already did. But after it became clear that he was determined to comfort her, and that he would not allow her to shake him off, she relented and relaxed into his touch. It *did* feel good...it was still Adam touching her, after all.

“You might be...well, I might be small compared to you,” he continued, squeezing her arm, “But you’re NOT ugly, Mila. You look the same as you did before – very pretty!”

Mila opened her mouth to argue with him, but she sighed and closed it without saying anything. She would accept what he said, even though she didn’t believe it. He was just being nice...just like he always acted toward her. But they were alone in this...this strange world, this unfamiliar land, and the last thing she wanted to do was make it all about her and her own self-doubts.

“Well...you’re sweet,” she replied softly, and suddenly, she perked up a little, smiling down at him. “And you – you look as handsome as ever.”

“What, does this green hood really do it for me?” Adam joked, throwing it over his head before quickly taking it off again.

“It’s super-cute on you,” Emma giggled.

“Well it fits, at least,” Adam observed, “And it looks like your clothes do too. I wonder why they fit us so...oh...Ohhhhhhhhhh *wait* a second...WOW.”

“What!?” asked Mila earnestly, leaning in closer towards him anxiously. “What is it!?”

"I know why our clothes fit," Adam began in a deadpan voice, staring straight ahead, before turning to look up at Mila excitedly. He leapt to hit feet, smacking himself in the head in the process. "I know where we are! Oh my god, I can't believe I didn't realize it before!"

"Wh-Where!?" asked Mila, startled and intrigued. "Where are we??"

"Okay, so...this is gonna sound crazy," Adam began, pacing quickly back and forth in front of Mila as she continued to sit with her back to the tree. She followed his animated body with her eyes, and blinked as she felt another warm stab of affection towards him. He just looked so...cute...especially pacing back and forth like that, with his small green hood bouncing behind his little head.

"But we're...we're IN your D&D game, Mila."

Adam stopped, staring at her, gauging her reaction with wide eyes. Mila blinked again, letting his words sink in.

"Just think about it!" Adam continued excitedly. "My green hood...your orange tunic...your orange boots...they're exactly what –"

"What our characters were wearing!" finished Mila. Her heart sped up as she started putting it all together. "And...that forest over there...I...I MADE those trees with my 3D printer!"

"And you painted the flowers in the field over there!" persisted Adam, pointing. "And...and that town in the distance, with the castle –"

"With the four battlements!" cried Mila. "I can see them from here! Next to the village! Oh my GOD how did I not notice all that before!?"

"Haha well, we were both kinda...kinda shook-up, I think," Adam chuckled, "So I think we can, um, cut ourselves a little slack."

They both basked for a few moments in the crazy reality they had uncovered. It seemed impossible, and yet, everything that Mila saw now proved that they were inside the game, beyond a shadow of a doubt. She even saw the little mudpit by the forest that she had painted herself, months before – it looked as real and convincing as could be. It was all there.

"This is just...this is so *crazy*!" she murmured. "How...*how* could this possibly have happened!?"

"I don't know," Adam replied, doing little toe-raises in his ranger boots, "But...uh, now that we're here, do you know if there's...haha, well, anything we should look out for?"

"Huh?" asked Mila, puzzled. "What do you mean?" She was still distracted by how small and cute Adam looked that she wasn't quite thinking straight.

"I mean like...are there any monsters in that forest over there?" Adam asked, pointing to the thick, dark trees to their right. "Or, like...is there a sorcerer or something who lives in that castle?"

Mila was about to ask why Adam thought she knew the answers to these questions, but then it all fell into place in her head and she understood: she had CREATED this world, after all, so of course it followed that she would know a thing or two about what was in it.

"I...might have put some, uhh, some werewolves in the forest," she admitted, blushing a little.

"Ohhhh wonderful," laughed Adam, his sarcasm non-acerbic and light.

"But that's...that's about it," she finished. "I don't think I had anyone specific living in the castle...but that doesn't mean that, you know...that no one lives there."

Right on cue, a deep, tolling bell sounded from the distant village, making them both start a little in surprise.

"Well I guess that's the monastery," Mila surmised, chuckling. She had noticed that Adam had jumped towards her when the bell had tolled, grabbing ahold of her arm instinctively. In a strange moment of clarity, she felt glad that she could make him feel safer, even as she craved that same feeling of protection from him.

"And that," said a deep, feminine voice from behind them, "Is an excellent guess."

Both Mila and Adam spun around, with Adam clinging even tighter to Mila's arm. In an automatic gesture of protection, Mila used her other arm to shield him from whatever it was they were turning to face. She wasn't thinking about her protective instincts right now, though, because she too had been startled. In front of them was a tall, beautiful woman with flowing blond hair that went down to the middle of her back. She was wearing a black medieval-style dress that came down to just above her knees, showing off her shapely legs, wrapped to her upper-calves in black leather boots. A rugged-looking knapsack hung from her shoulder, and attached to her belt was a long, heavy-looking sword. Neither Mila nor Adam doubted this woman's ability to wield such a sword, however, since, in addition to her curvy, athletic build, she stood nearly 7 feet tall, about a foot shorter than Mila.

The mysterious woman smiled amiably at them, and both Mila and Adam relaxed a bit...but not too much. This woman sure was pleasant to look at, but they still didn't know why she was.

"I'm sorry to startle you," said the woman in her pleasing voice, "But I can't seem to resist just sneaking up on people when they pop into this world, haha."

Mila and Adam just stood there staring, not knowing what to say in response. The cool breeze kicked up again, and the overcast clouds seemed denser all of a sudden.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” continued the woman, sweeping her leg back and collapsing into an impressive curtsy, “My name is Tara, and I’ve been sent to help you both in the genesis of your quest.”

“T-Tara?” stammered Mila. She was the biggest person here, and yet all she could manage was to make sure she had gotten the woman’s name right. Inwardly, Mila chastised herself. ‘Adam’s counting on you to stand up for him,’ she told herself savagely, ‘So stand tall and at least act like you’re not afraid!’

“Well, that’s really just the first part of my name,” Tara laughed, with a flip of her blond hair, “If you actually wanted to know, my full name is Taratearra Teshathivi Tabassum Ridhima-muk-Busayarah Via...but you can just call me Tara.”

She laughed again, an enchanting, musical laugh that again served to put Mila and Adam at ease. In the midst of her laugh, Tara stepped a little sideways into a mud puddle, making her stumble slightly. She seemed to be used to this kind of thing, though, because, in the midst of her stumbling, she rolled her eyes at herself and shook her head in mock-disparagement.

“Oooop! I always turn into a klutz when they send me into the countryside...gotta take time getting used to this soft ground...heheh aaaaanyway, I suppose you two...Mila and Adam...are wondering what I’m doing here?”

Mila and Adam both nodded, clearly amazed that this woman they had never met before knew their names. Adam had stopped squeezing so tightly onto Mila’s arm, and had stepped out in front of her, eying Tara curiously. Mila already missed their physical closeness, even if it had been because they had both been afraid. She also felt guilty that Adam was the one stepping out in front...but she still didn’t feel like she had the confidence to assert herself that way.

“How...do you know our names?” Adam ventured, inclining his head up at Tara. She seemed to appreciate Adam’s forwardness and gave him a broad, rosy smile.

“I know a lot more than that about the two of you,” Tara replied, chuckling, “But never mind about that now. What’s important is that I have been sent...by the powers that be...by the...heheh, well, let’s not get into that just yet...by the powers that be, yes! To inaugurate your quest!”

Tara’s apparently lighthearted and playful tone of voice had reassured Mila and Adam that they weren’t dealing with someone threatening, but this tone seemed to contrast with the more serious concept of a “quest.” What did she mean by it!? Adam turned around to look up at Mila, and the two of them shared a confused glance. Mila blinked and Adam shrugged and gave her

a smile, as if to say, 'Well, may as well go on ahead with whatever this is, since we're stuck here.' Mila felt a warm affection for him – even though he was so tiny now, he still was able to maintain his plucky, independent spirit. She admired him for it so much, and wished that she could emulate it.

"So...this quest..." Adam began, stepping forward to Tara (with Mila following close behind him, taking one step for every three Adam took), "What's...uhm...what is it, exactly?"

"Well you see, I can't really tell you," Tara replied, putting her hands on her knees and bending over, so she could address Adam more directly, "Because I don't know everything that it will entail. I mean, I know a few things here and there, little tidbits of information and secrets along the way that you'll find MOST helpful. But as to the true nature of the quest..." And here, she rose up impressively, cocking her head to the side as her blue eyes sparkled mysteriously, "The two of you will have to figure that out for yourselves. But you WILL need this."

Reaching into her knapsack, Tara took out something and handed it down to Adam, giving Mila a quick glance as she did so. Adam reached out both of his hands and accepted the parcel. It was wrapped in a leather sack that had a large drawstring around, which Adam undid. Mila unconsciously sank to her knees next to him to get a better look at what it was. She registered that her knees were getting a bit muddy, but she cared more about the intrigue of this mysterious parcel than that.

Adam pulled out what was inside – it was a large, ancient-looking book, with a hard, pockmarked cover that seemed like it had been through a lot, given the several dark stains, burns, and even slash marks that covered its surface. It looked humorously large in Adam's hands, even though he didn't seem to be having too much trouble holding it up.

"What is it?" Adam asked, looking up at Tara. The tall blond grinned at him and arched an eyebrow.

"Open it," Tara replied simply.

Adam obliged, and in doing so, the momentum from the heavy pages made him stumble to the side a little. Mila reached out and steadied him with her arm, feeling her large hand easily wrap around his hip. It was unnerving, just how much bigger she was than him...once she had helped him maintain his balance, she pulled her hand back carefully. He was so small compared to her that she couldn't touch him without being afraid that she would accidentally hurt him.

But now, along with Adam, she was looking down at the book's open pages. They were full of strange, arcane symbols...ancient runes, cabalistic and labyrinthine diagrams, random blocks of numbers, miniature maps, drawings of floor plans, astrological charts, and on and on. With a bit of difficulty, Adam flipped through the pages – he didn't so much "flip" the pages as "lift" them

with his little hands. Mila wanted to help, since she wouldn't have had any problem flipping through them, but she said nothing, letting Adam take the lead.

"Wow, this is...huh...this is...a lot!" Adam exclaimed. "I don't, uhm...heheh, how are we...are we supposed to...understand all this?"

"You're such an eager little adventurer, Adam!" laughed Tara, throwing her head back and shaking her long blond hair again in the breeze. Mila was beginning to think that Tara enjoyed flaunting herself just a bit too much, and she felt strangely heartened that SHE was the bigger, taller woman. Her thoughts snapped back to the present moment, however, when a sudden lick of purple flame leapt out from the pages of the book with an audible burst, flashing dangerously close to Adam's face. Jerking his head back, he closed the book shut, falling backwards into Mila, who caught him effortlessly.

"But don't you get too ahead of yourself," laughed Tara, obviously amused at the whole spectacle. "If I were you two, I would start on the first page. The *Prayana Gati* is a funny little book – you'll find that its contents have a habit of changing themselves, switching up, becoming invisible, bleeding through, haha, even springing up out of the page and nipping you in the nose or singing your eyebrows! So use caution when opening it."

"You could have told him that before he opened it!" Mila heard herself saying indignantly. She wasn't in the habit of being so forward with her emotions, but she felt protective of Adam, and was annoyed at Tara for seemingly playing around with them.

"No harm done, no harm," chuckled Tara reassuringly as she straightened herself up and heaved a deep breath. "And now, I must be off. So much more to get done...a busy little bee like me can never linger for too long, especially when the High Basileus is so impatient for me drumming up support for his campaign against the cutthroat tribes of the...heheh, well...I suppose that doesn't really concern you two now, does it?"

Mila and Adam just stared blankly at Tara, not knowing what to say.

"Yes, yes, don't worry about all that," Tara laughed, waving her hand, "And just focus on following the instructions in that book. Just remember two things," – and here, she held up two fingers, and became quite serious – "First, go page by page...do NOT skip ahead...and second, and most importantly, the greatest tool, the greatest weapon, the greatest asset BOTH of you have...is each other. Never forget that."

Right on cue, the bells of the monastery rang out again, causing Tara to smile.

"Perfect timing!" she sang out, pointing towards the town, "Mark well the sound of those bells – they will take on new meaning for you both...if you follow the book."

Mila and Adam had turned towards the town, towards the sound of the bells, and then when they looked back, they saw that Tara was gone. She had vanished just as abruptly as she had appeared.

“Oh!” exclaimed Adam, pointing to where Tara had been, “Uhhhh...she just...wow. She’s gone. Do you see her anywhere?”

“No,” said Mila, looking around for any sign of her. “I guess she just...uhm...I guess she’s gone.”

A strange moment of silence passed between them; neither of them knew what to think or to make of this whole conundrum that they had been thrust into unawares.

“You, uhh...you sure we’re both still awake?” Adam quipped, looking up at Mila and grinning.

“Heheh, I guess so,” Mila chuckled appreciatively. They both shared an ironic laugh, together expressing the same sentiment: this situation was so outlandish, so crazy, that it deserved a little laugh.

“Ok,” said Adam, “So I guess...we’re here...and we should just...start on page one, huh?”

“I guess so,” Mila nodded, shuffling up closer to Adam on her knees. She was again struck by how much bigger she was than him – even on her knees, she was almost a full head taller – but she made an effort to push these thoughts into the back of her mind. Adam was already in “go mode” for the start of whatever this “quest” was, and she told herself that she at least owed it to him to keep pace.

Adam slipped his finger under the heavy cover and started opening it.

“Careful,” whispered Mila, and she held her huge hand poised in the air, ready to shield his face from any flames or sparks that might fly up. But fortunately, none of that happened this time, and the book simply opened to the first page. On the yellowed parchment, in long, flowing letters, was a riddle, which Adam read out loud:

“A container without hinges, lock, or lid,
which Adam’s partner was forbid,
Look up I say, and you shall find,
A most useful seed confined.”

They both read it over a few more times, and lapsed into a pondering silence. Mila didn’t feel like she was good with riddles, but the cadence of this particular one reminded her of something.

"It's kinda like that scene in The Hobbit, right?" she observed, "When Bilbo is in the cave with Gollum?"

"Haha YES! I knew it sounded familiar!" exclaimed Adam.

"Except the punchline to that riddle is 'eggs,'" continued Mila, "Hmmm...It was an unexpected answer, because no one would expect an egg to be called a 'container'...makes me wonder if it's some kind of a food or something..."

"Especially considering the 'seed' part at the end," added Adam, nodding. "Like, a fruit..." The two of them thought some more, until Adam piped up again:

"Which my partner was forbid? Huh...my partner forbid...I guess this book knows my name too."

"I wonder why it mentions you specifically," mused Mila. "And...I guess me too, as your, uhm...partner." She felt a little tingle of electricity go over her, but she did her best to ignore it.

"Yeah, because it seems like...wait...wait, hold on a sec," Adam said, his voice starting to rise in excitement. "Maybe by 'Adam' it doesn't mean ME exactly, and by 'Adam's partner' it doesn't mean YOU..."

"What do you mean?" asked Mila, puzzled.

"Like, in the biblical story," Adam continued, gesturing with his hands, since Eve was holding the book now (since it was much easier for her to hold it), "Who's Adam's partner?"

"Uhhh...oh...oh! You mean Eve?" asked Mila.

"Yeah!" nodded Adam energetically, "And what is Eve forbidden to do, but end up doing anyway?"

"Eat the apple! Ah, right, I see where you're going with this!" smiled Mila. "And it would make sense too, considering the, uhm...the seed part at the end..."

"Right!" said Adam, "And...and I guess, uhm..."

"We should look up?" Mila finished uncertainly, and the two of them did just that in unison looking up into the tree that was above them. Through the gnarled branches, and the full, green leaves, something red glinted down at them from the top of the tree: a single red apple.

"Ha!!" cried Adam triumphantly, pointing, "Look! Look, there it is!!"

"Well...that wasn't too hard!" laughed Mila, feeling a warm jolt of encouragement.

"Except...it's way up there," Adam said, craning his head, "Even too tall for you to reach."

"Not if I reach with you," Mila blurted out. As soon as she had seen the apple, her mind had quickly worked out how to reach it.

"Huh?" asked Adam. It was his turn to be confused.

"Heheh, I-I mean...what if I hold you up there," Mila explained, blushing, "And...and you reach out and...and pick it? That way we'd be using...uhm...the combined...you know..."

"Ohhhhh I see!" grinned Adam, "Haha, sorry, I didn't...I hadn't even thought of that. So you could...you could pick me up like that?"

Mila couldn't help but laugh a little in response, even though she felt strange doing so. "Haha, I think it'll be easy," she chuckled, spreading her arms out to him, "I mean, I'm like twice your size, right?"

"Well...yeah, you are," smiled Adam, "Just...I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Pssssh, I'll be fine," grinned Mila, surprising even herself with her confidence. "Here...uhm, just...let me just...pick you up here..."

Just a few moments later, Mila was holding Adam high up into the tree, with her hands wrapped around his hips. She marveled at how tiny he felt – her hands easily spanned over halfway around his whole body, and even more strikingly, it didn't even feel like she was lifting anything at all.

"Still good down there?" Adam asked from within the leaves and branches.

"You're light as a feather!" Mila laughed. Even though it felt odd to be touching Adam in this way (nothing like the fantasies of him dominating her in bed, like she used to have back in the real world), Mila still enjoyed the contact immensely. It just felt strange to be holding him like this...like he was a child.

"Aaaalmost...aaaaand...I got it!" Adam called down to her. Mila lowered him back down, and moments later she was back on her knees, looking down at the perfectly glossy, deep red apple in Adam's hands.

"Wow," murmured Mila, "That's...like, the prettiest apple I've ever seen."

"I know, right?" agreed Adam, "I've never wanted to bite into an apple so much in my life."

“But...but maybe we shouldn’t eat it?” Mila offered cautiously. “I’m not really sure about...uhh, about this world...maybe it’s poisonous or something.”

“But we need to get inside it,” Adam pondered, “Hmmm, maybe we find a rock to smash it with? It’s way too big for me to break with my hands.”

“Maybe for you,” Mila chuckled, “But not for me.”

“Oh! Haha, you’re right,” Adam smiled, handing her the apple. The fruit had looked quite large in Adam’s hands, but now that Mila was holding it, it almost looked like the size of a plum.

“Well...” she breathed out, “Here goes...”

She squeezed the apple in her hand. Instantly, a flood of dark purple juices spilled in between her fingers, and, far from the expected white fruit inside, they saw that the interior of this apple was a deep violet. Mila kept squeezing, and it only took her another second to completely decimate the apple’s structure.

“Woah!” blurted out Adam, “That was...impressive!”

“Haha, thanks,” Mila blushed, but just then, their attention was drawn to what had been in the middle of the apple. Instead of seeds, a single golden key lay in Mila’s hand, winking up at them.

Chapter 5

"All I'm saying," stressed Mila, as she patiently waited for Adam to catch up to her, "Is it really, *really* isn't a big deal to me, just to...you know...carry the knapsack for a while. That book must feel really heavy to you after a while."

"No, no," grunted Adam through a smile as he stared up at his 8-foot companion, "I'm...I'm fine. I've got this. Heheh, I mean, you were the one who did everything to find the key in the first place, and –"

"Not true!" cut in Mila, pointing down at him. "You basically solved that riddle single-handedly! All I did was...uhh...lift you up into the tree."

She paused, not quite knowing why she felt self-conscious as Adam finally caught up with her. Maybe the memory of just how easy it had been to lift him up made her feel...well, she didn't really understand how it made her feel. On one hand, it made her feel awkward and ugly, thinking how gigantic she must seem to him, but on the other hand, she couldn't deny that there was something a little enjoyable – even thrilling – about being so big and strong. Crushing that apple in her hand without even trying had been...pretty cool. And now that they were walking across the vast, expansive field, toward the town, Mila had to admit that it paid to have big legs and a long stride. Adam already looked winded.

"We both...we...both...solved the riddle," breathed Adam, bending down to put his hands on his knees and catch his breath. "And anyway, I...whew...uhm...we...what was I saying?"

"You were saying," declared Mila, feeling a sudden hot rush of confidence, "How right I was about you needing a break from carrying the knapsack. Now here – hand that to me!"

She reached down an outsutplayed hand in front of Adam, flexing her fingers in and out, in and out, indicating that Adam should go ahead and do as she asked. He remained bent forward, his hands on his knees, for a few more moments, staring at the huge hand gesturing in front of him. He seemed almost confused...transfixed by its size. But then he rolled his eyes, sighed, and straightened up as he took the knapsack off his back and handed it to Mila. Her eyes sparkled as she accepted it with two fingers, twirling it around a couple times playfully before rising back up to her full height. Again, Adam seemed momentarily spellbound by her size, her height, and the ease with which she had whisked away the heavy load using just two fingers. But it only lasted a few moments, and the next second he was smiling up at her in admiration.

"You know, I don't even see why I was freaked out here," he chuckled, "Having someone like you next to me. Anyone who tries to mess with me for being short and small...uhhh..."

"I'll squish them!" Mila laughed, miming the action with a squeeze of her hand. The two of them kept laughing for a few moments, until gradually their mirth died back down, and they remembered the task at hand.

“So...speaking of which...” Adam began, as they resumed walking toward the town (he had to walk a lot faster than Mila to keep up), “Do we know, like...who lives in the town, anyway?”

“I have no idea,” replied Mila. She had threaded the knapsack up her arm, and it sat on her shoulder, looking comically small, except for the large book-shaped bulge inside. Adam had safely stashed the key away in his pocket for safekeeping. “But I think that you were right about the key...you know...”

“About the odds being that it unlocks something in the town?” Adam replied. “Yeah, that just seemed like the most logical next step, right? He took out the golden key and turned it around and around in his hands, analyzing it as he walked. “It’s really old and clunky...probably unlocks something big. Or something with a big lock, at least.”

He looked up and was surprised to see that Mila had already gotten way out ahead of him again, and, half-a-minute later, when he finally caught up, he was breathing hard again. Mila had turned around, noticing him getting red in the face.

“Oh! Adam, I’m...I’m sorry!” she exclaimed, stopping completely and bending down toward him. “I was going too fast again! I really need to slow down and take it more at your pace!”

“No, no, you...whooh, you’re...uhmm...you’re fine,” breathed Adam, trying to hide the grimace on his face. “Heheh, it looks like my soccer stamina didn’t really transfer into this world.”

“That’s so unfair to you!” Mila exclaimed indignantly. “All that training, only to be out of breath now because I’m a big, hulking giantess who won’t slow down for you!”

“Mila, you’re not...hulking,” corrected Adam, standing up as he continued to catch his breath. “You look amazing, actually, you know?”

Mila blinked and opened her mouth slightly, then closed it again. She hadn’t expected that kind of compliment, especially considering that she didn’t FEEL amazing in this huge body...except of course that little electrical excitement she had been feeling about how nice it was to be strong. But with Adam coming straight out and saying that she looked amazing, well...it felt lovely to hear.

“Thankssss,” was all she could say, quietly, as she bent down towards him. She stood crouching there, watching Adam breathing hard, and then, suddenly, she had a wonderful idea.

“Hey!” she cried happily, “I know! Why don’t I just carry you on my back the rest of the way!?”

Adam’s head snapped up to her, and for a moment he felt his breath catch in his chest. She just looked so...huge...bending down towards him like that. But the sweetness in her face, and the bright joy flashing from her smile, both worked to undermine the intimidation he felt. For the first

time, he felt himself really take in how nice she looked. He had already complimented her before, but he was actually realizing how apt his compliment had been. Still, though...what she had just proposed...there was just no way...

"Well?" asked Mila eagerly, "How about it??" She brought her face even closer down towards his, to the point where Adam unconsciously backed up a couple paces. She looked amazing, yes...but her looming posture had really started to make him feel a little too tiny for his own comfort.

"Uh, n-no, heheh...no, it's...it's okay," Adam stammered, holding his hands up as he smiled appreciatively, "But I think...uh, I think I'm gonna be alright."

"Oh whaaaat? But you're so tired!" Mila protested. She straightened back up to her full height and gestured at him. "And look! You're out of breath. We've still got a little ways to go until we get to the town. Awww, and your face is all red too. Adam, come on, it'll be so easy for me...easier for us both, really. Here, let me help you."

She stepped forward, rapidly closing the gap in between them, and reached down again. Before he could react, Adam felt her huge hand wrapping all the way around his bicep. For a split-second, he registered the warm strength and force of her hand against his body, and he felt a kind of electric thrill jolt through him. This huge giantess, this powerful entity overwhelming him like this...was *Mila*.

But just as quickly, he felt the automatic repelling force of his own instincts, and he was staggering back away from her.

"No! Mila! I...I really am okay!" He heard his own voice in his ears, and it sounded a little louder and higher-pitched than he had intended. At the same time, he saw her brow furrow as he felt the sudden loosening of her huge hand on his arm. She looked confused, puzzled, almost hurt, and he immediately felt a need to lighten his reaction. He spread his hands out and started laughing.

"Hahaha I—I mean...thanks, Mila...really, I appreciate it, but..." — and here he thought quickly for a moment before continuing — "But how am I gonna get used to being, uh, you know...small in this world, if you...if you're always, uhm...doing things for me?"

Mila had straightened up again, with her head tilted to the side. She seemed to be weighing what Adam was saying, studying him closely. He did kind of have a point, and even though she thought his face was a little too red, and that he was a little out of breath, did that really mean that she could just swoop in and carry him!? She inwardly began to chastise herself, but managed to stop fairly quickly when she reminded herself that her intentions had been pure — she wasn't trying to manipulate him in any way; she just wanted to help him!

“Are you *really* sure you’re ok?” she asked one last time. She blinked and couldn’t help but smile a little. He just looked so cute down there, and his eagerness to remain independent had the paradoxical effect of making him even cuter.

“Totally!” Adam nodded confidently.

“Because if you, like, pass out from exhaustion,” Mila declared, her smile widening, “Then I WILL carry you, and you won’t be able to stop me then.”

“Ha! It’s a deal,” Adam laughed. Moments later, the two of them resumed their journey towards the town, with Mila privately reminding herself to take smaller, slower steps.

A little while later, they finally reached the town. The two of them surveyed it, both feeling a little nervous and a little wary. Neither of them really knew what to expect, but as soon as they came to the first street, they felt like they were somewhere familiar. The town had an old-medieval feel to it. The streets were unpaved, and a little muddy from the recent rain. Slightly-crooked two and three-story shops lined both sides of the streets, made of dark wood, with thatched roofs. Straight forward, in the distance, toward the middle of the town, they saw the turrets of the castle, and the bell tower of the monastery nearby. They lowered their eyes back to the street. Gently-swinging signs hanging from the storefronts advertised their wares: blacksmith, wheelwright, gemstones, apothecary, armory, an inn, and a sign for something called “The Fiery Pearl.”

“What do you think that is?” asked Mila in a low voice, pointing to the last sign.

“It’s probably a tavern, right?” Adam replied. “Sounds a lot like one, anyway, doesn’t it?”

“Ohhh! Yes, I think you’re right!” Mila exclaimed. Both of them hardly realized that they were standing much closer to one another, speaking barely above a whisper.

The reason why was because they weren’t alone. A number of other people were walking up and down the street, many of them moving slowly, all of them wearing characteristic medieval-style clothing, with the men in stockings or tunics, and the women in gowns, many of them with wimples to cover their hair. A few more mysterious figures were completely hooded, moving slowly along the walkways. It wasn’t a doleful town, but it was not particularly bright and vibrant either. There was plenty of activity; people moved about with purpose. But there seemed to be something intangible hanging over them all, some sort of invisible power or presence, that prompted everyone to caution. This was a town with secrets.

But what Mila and Adam noticed most of all was the fact that, left and right, people were staring at them. This was another reason why they had moved closer together. People’s glances weren’t harsh or threatening, but even still, it wasn’t exactly comfortable for either of them to be stared at by a street full of strangers in this peculiar new world. Mila put her hand gently on Adam’s shoulder as they continued to walk through the town, and this time, he didn’t protest.

She hardly even realized she had done it. She just didn't like the way people were staring at him; she had even caught a few people pointing and snickering under their breath, and it made her feel mad, and aggressively protective of him.

"So I guess I'm thinking," Adam muttered quietly up to Mila, "That maybe we should...I don't know...try the tavern first?"

"Huh?" asked Mila, blinking down at him as she snapped away her eyes from a group of hooded older men who had been leering across the lane at them. "What was that?"

"The Fiery Pearl," Adam said, pointing to the tavern. "I think we should probably try there first, you know? Look around...see if we can get some information?"

"Yeah...uh, yeah, good idea," nodded Mila. She was looking back at those men, and this time, she didn't hesitate to shoot them a hard, defiant look, like she was daring them to say something. These men might have been a lot bigger than Adam, but SHE was a lot bigger than THEM.

"E-Everything alright, Mila?" asked Adam, as they crossed the muddy street towards the tavern.

"Fine...everything's fine," Mila replied, trying to sound casual. "Just...not sure how much I like this place so far. Everyone's looking at us."

"Probably because, uhm, heheh, you know...we're a bit of an odd couple," chuckled Adam.

"Well they should know not to stare," Mila said firmly, tightening her big hand on Adam's shoulder. She had felt a little painful throb inside her in response to Adam's words, but she knew he hadn't meant it as anything more than a little humorous observation...and she was surprised how quickly the throb dissipated inside her. Maybe it was something in the damp, heavy air of this new place, but whatever it was, Mila was feeling a bit more energy than usual.

They walked into The Fiery Pearl (with Mila having to duck her head as they entered), and, for a moment, both of them stood on the inside threshold of the entrance, taking in the scene. Adam had been right – it was a tavern, with almost all of the archetypical trappings that the two of them would have expected from a medieval-style pub. The light was low, and there was a dank, heavy smell that permeated the entire establishment, which was really just one big rectangular room, with a central bar, surrounding tables, and booths that lined the dark-bricked walls. Large chandeliers of wax candles burned bright enough to give the place at least some light, and with the candles dripping their white wax occasionally down onto the wooden tables, or the dark, heavily-worn stone floor. All around, shadowy figures sat, many of them hunched over large mugs of frothing beer or cider. A few indistinct groups appeared to be huddled in a couple of the corner booths, conversing in hushed voices. Far from being a loud, lively tavern, filled with music and raucous laughter, this was an enigmatic establishment, a place where people came

to discuss secrets in low voices, or to relieve themselves after long, arduous hours of traveling on the road.

"Guess we should...go up to the bar," whispered Adam.

"Mhmm," nodded Mila. She placed her hand against the upper half of Adam's back as she took the lead, stepping forward towards the circular bar in the middle of the room. A large, tall blond woman with bare arms looked up at them from behind the counter. She was in the process of cleaning out a large beer glass with a rag, and, as they approached, Mila saw that she was actually quite pretty. Her blond hair was done up in two pigtails, giving her a kind of confident "tomboyish" look. To Mila, this barmaid actually looked rather small, but to Adam, she looked positively huge...not as huge as Mila, of course, but at least a good 6 feet tall.

"Well hello there," the woman said in a hearty, full-throated voice, her eyes dancing humorously up and down, sizing them both up, "Now how can I help you?"

Mila had a brief moment of hesitation – she wasn't at all used to taking the lead in any kind of situation, let alone a strange and mysterious medieval fantasy world that she and Adam had been suddenly thrust into. But then something seemed to click in her brain, and she reminded herself that the barmaid's head only came up to around the middle of her breasts. What was she doing, hesitating around someone so small? If anyone should be intimidated in this situation, Mila reasoned, it should be the barmaid, and not *her*.

"We're travelers from...from a distant land," Mila began, pausing at first with uncertainty, but then straightening herself up to her full height as she registered how deep and powerful her voice sounded compared to the barmaid. "And we'd like some refreshment after a long journey, along with news of the comings and goings of this town. We don't actually know where we are."

"Well certainly, madam," nodded the barmaid, smiling warmly as her eyes remained averted upward, studying Mila with undisguised admiration. "Any warrior of the elven clans is welcome here, especially one so clearly accomplished as you!"

"Much appreciated," grinned Mila, deciding to ignore the fact that she had no clue what the barmaid was talking about. She sat herself down on a worn, round wooden stool at the bar, and, without even thinking, reached down and hoisted Adam up onto a stool of his own. Mila couldn't help but smile a little at how tiny Adam looked on his stool – its wooden circumference spanned widely out on all sides of his small butt, to the point where he almost looked like a child sitting in an adult's seat. From his perspective, after recovering from the surprise of Mila helping him up, Adam wasn't able to avoid noticing how Mila's huge ass hung off her stool, almost making half of it disappear entirely. He looked down at how much room there was on his own stool, and felt a flash of helpless inferiority, mixed with something else...something strange in his mind, that tickled his thoughts with intrigue, and even excitement.

But this all went through his brain in a flash, and he didn't have much time to dwell on it, because now, the barmaid was looking squarely at him, her head inclined down, and her green eyes twinkling amusedly.

"And who is this?" asked the barmaid, to Mila (even though her eyes stayed fixed on Adam), "Your page?"

Adam felt Mila's huge hand against his back, covering nearly half of its entire length and width. He felt curiously intimidated by this green-eyed barmaid (who looked rather built and strong herself), but this simple touch from Mila was more than enough to dispel any fear. He felt completely protected.

"Yes...yes this is my page," Mila replied, a little shortly. She didn't exactly like how this woman was grinning at Adam.

"Hmmm, interesting," murmured the barmaid, putting the empty beer glass down and leaning on both of her well-developed forearms as she continued studying Adam, "You don't really see such...small pages...especially those who belong to elfin warriors of such stature, haha." She inclined her head sideways, and her mouth spread into a playful smile. "He's so tiiiiiny, madam! Look at those little arms, haha! How in seven heavens does he carry your sword and spear? He must be very strong indeed!"

Adam immediately felt the embarrassed hot red rush into his face, and he was immediately aware of Mila's giant hand pressing tighter into his back, to the point where she was unconsciously forcing him to lean forward on his stool.

"Our refreshments, please," Mila declared, without even thinking. She almost felt like the voice that came out of her mouth was spoken by someone else, someone with a lot more confidence than she actually had. But it was indeed her voice, and somehow, she had managed to respond to the barmaid's teasing inquiries with a firm, authoritative tone that didn't overly betray how irritated she was. More and more, she didn't appreciate the kind of condescending attention Adam was getting. Compared to this woman, he was a little shrimp, and Mila wasn't going to let her even think about getting close to him.

"Of course, of course, my apologies, ohtacára," responded the barmaid deferentially, nodding quickly and bowing her head. "It's just my custom to engage new guests, especially considering..." and here, the barmaid lowered her voice and glanced quickly around the tavern, like she was making sure she wasn't being overheard. Mila and Adam both leaned forward towards her, intrigued.

"Especially considering all the *guptagul* who have been slinking through here recently," the barmaid finished, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Guptagul?" asked Adam. "What...what are those?"

The barmaid stared at him carefully; a strange expression had alighted on her face. It seemed to suggest, on one hand, that she couldn't believe Adam didn't know what the term meant. And on the other hand, her expression had an edge to it, a suspicious slant, like she was considering perhaps that this was all some sort of trap.

"We only just arrived here," Mila added mildly, leaning forward and folding her own bare arms up against the wooden bar. "So we're not familiar with your terms and titles here." Again, she felt a need to assert herself, and she felt an odd delight, glancing down and seeing how big her arms looked compared to the solidly-built barmaid's.

'Geez...I'm *huge*!' Mila thought to herself, again feeling a pleasant shiver of electricity run down her spine as she took in how gigantic she was compared to everything around her. With a throb of pity, she saw that Adam wasn't even close to being able to lean his arms on the bar, which was almost even with his shoulders.

"I...well yes, I see that, ohtacára" the barmaid replied, suddenly a bit puzzled, "But...hmmm, you must have come from faaaaar, far away, beyond the Mirror Sea, if you don't know about the..."

But here, she saw that Mila was staring hard at her and stopped, blushing a little. And then, with a toss of her blond hair, she was light and playful again, a smile gracing her pretty face.

"But never mind, never mind!" the barmaid laughed pleasantly. "Not my place to question strangers, especially not a regal ohtacára like yourself, miss....?"

"Mila," came the reply, and she put her hand around Adam's shoulder, squeezing it tenderly. To Adam, he felt the warmth of her hand and lower arm press gently into the entirety of his lower back, and his eyelids fluttered involuntarily. Her touch, and the weight of her hand, felt so nice, and amazingly reassuring.

"And this is Adam, my...page, and my companion," Mila finished, feeling like she needed to add that last little bit to keep Adam from feeling too humiliated.

"Mantissa is my name!" chirped the barmaid, curtsying grandly behind the counter, evidently enjoying herself. "And it's my pleasure to serve you both! Haha, I hope you'll forgive my questions before, madam, I really meant no harm."

"Aw, it's...it's fine," replied Mila, waving her hand dismissively as she smiled. Mantissa seemed so friendly, and looked so fresh, that Mila felt a little bad for having been cold to her before. But she reminded herself that she owed it to herself and Adam to be on the lookout. They still had no idea where they were.

"Now then!" Mantissa trilled, "What'll it be then? A hearty mug of firedraught for the elven warrior, and a little shot of pink urchin-squeeze for the page, perhaps?"

A little while later, Mila was halfway through her mug of firedraught, feeling noticeably more relaxed and lighter on her stool. She peered down into the bright red swirling mixture, which tasted like spicy cinnamon, and warmed her all the way down to her toes. Adam, for his part, was taking his shot of pink urchin-squeeze slowly, and had only managed a few sips so far. He had about one-fortieth the alcohol content in his drink that Mila had in hers, but the metabolizing power difference in their bodies was obvious. Even after one sip of the fizzy, pleasantly tangy drink, the tavern had started to go a little wobbly, and he had to slow down.

“Haha awwww, the page...I mean, Adam, can’t hold his urchin!” teased Mantissa, sticking her tongue into the inside of her cheek as she continued cleaning glasses behind the bar. Mila wasn’t even annoyed by Mantissa anymore (perhaps thanks to the warming effects of the firedraught), and she simply sat there, her big arms folded in front of her large mug, smiling tenderly down at Adam as he grinned back at her sheepishly, his eyes going a bit sideways from the effects of his drink. He looked so cute.

“So...Mila,” Adam ventured in a low voice, a few minutes later, after he had recovered himself a bit, “Maybe we should take another look at the book, you know...now that we’re here.”

“Mmm, yes, okay,” Mila nodded, reaching back into her knapsack and taking the book out. Adam couldn’t help but be amazed – Mila could effortlessly hold the huge book in one hand! But quickly he was joining her in focusing hard on the second page, which she had opened to. He had to kneel up on his stool to see it. The blank parchment page stared back at them, unhelpful.

“Huh,” Adam mused a few seconds later, fingering the golden key that was hidden away in his pocket, “I guess maybe we just...uhh...wait for it to...to say something?”

“Yeah...maybe,” murmured Mila. She had noticed that, as soon as she got out the book, Mantissa’s head had jerked up from the other side of the bar. The barmaid had been assisting other customers, but the book had clearly caught her eye. A minute later, she had worked her way back around to them, clearly trying to act as if nothing was amiss. But both Mila and Adam could immediately tell that something intense was going on with her.

“Is that...?” Mantissa asked in a hushed whisper, leaning close into them, “Is that one of the twelve *Anandas*!?” She had gone quite pale, and her eyes were wide, and getting wider. Both Adam and Mila looked at her blankly, having no idea how to respond.

“Who...who *are* you!?” Mantissa asked suddenly, still in a hushed whisper, as her brilliant green eyes darted back and forth between Mila and Adam. She didn’t seem upset or accusatory – instead, to the immense disquiet of them both, Mantissa seemed afraid.

Suddenly, a quick series of purple sparks flashed across the middle of the blank page. All three of them started, surprised by the sudden sight and sound. It was finished as soon as it started,

leaving a slight burning smell in the air. But that wasn't what they were all looking at now. There were words on the page now, in raw, harshly-dashed calligraphy that was different from the smooth strokes of the letters before:

"They're coming. Close me."

They all read the words, but no one did anything. Both Mila and Adam registered that the book was talking to them, but neither of them had moved yet.

The purple sparks flashed again, even quicker, leaving one more word below:

"NOW"

Without thinking, Mila shot her hand over to the heavy cover and slammed the book closed, the wind from the pages making Adam's eyes blink. At the same time, Mantissa's eyes had turned to the doorway of the tavern, and she went even paler still, her eyes wide with a new kind of fear.

"Oh heavens above," she breathed, and thrust her head down, whispering quickly, "Don't turn around, act normal...two guptagui just walked in."

Chapter 6

Mila and Adam both turned toward the opening of the pub, and their breath caught in their chest. Two very tall, graceful, elegant, curvy figures had just walked in. They were women, Mila thought, and yet...something about them was different. They were strikingly beautiful, with long, flowing black hair, high cheekbones, and fierce, dark eyes. Their curvaceous figures were supported by thick thighs and wide, vigorous hips, and Adam couldn't help but notice that they weren't lacking in the "breast" department, either. They seemed to be dressed for activity, or, Mila thought, combat, since their short black tunics and cut-off black leather tops allowed their arms and legs to move freely. Mila instantly noticed that each guptagati was carrying a spear, with a winking, sharp metal point at the end...they also appeared to have daggers in their belts. They each had a series of intimidating-looking silver rings in their ears, and all that, combined with their strikingly-beautiful faces and buxom, curvy bodies, made them quite imposing. Mila immediately sensed that these two strangers were making a beeline straight for her and Adam, and she protectively put her arm around him as they approached.

"Just stay close to me, okay?" she murmured down at him, before taking a step forward toward the oncoming two figures, "And let me deal with them."

Even as she felt a pang of fear when they started coming towards her and Adam, Mila realized that, even though they looked scary, they were a full foot shorter than her...and even though they also looked strong and curvy, she was curvier still, and probably outweighed them by at least 80 pounds.

"They come with us," one of the guptagati spoke out suddenly, addressing the bartender as she pointed straight at Mila and Adam with a long, sharp, manicured black fingernail. Mila was surprised at the sound of the voice – she expected a musical, feminine sound, but it came out more raspy and intense.

"Uhhh...I'm sorry," Mila declared, surprising herself with her own boldness as she stood directly in front of Adam, crossing her arms on her chest, "But we're not going anywhere."

Adam was hidden behind Mila's impressively wide hips, and he felt totally cowed and overwhelmed by the situation. Everyone – Mila, the guptagati, and the bartender, Mantissa – completely towered over him. He was afraid of these two strange women, but he wanted to show Mila that he could stick up for himself, and that the burden of dealing with them didn't rest squarely on her shoulders

"W-What do you want with us?" he managed to say, his voice shaking a little as he struggled to assert himself. He felt Mila's big hand reach down and tighten over his shoulder, like she was wordlessly telling him to stand down and let her handle everything.

The guptagatis' dark eyes lit up as they stared down at Adam, and Mila could have sworn that she saw one of them extend her tongue out for a split second – a long, slithering tongue – and lick around its mouth, before disappearing back in between the plush lips. Mila blinked, not sure

if she was seeing things or not. But she was certain that the two figures were now fixing their gaze on Adam in a way that made her very uncomfortable.

'They don't mean him well,' she thought to herself, 'They don't mean EITHER of us well...but especially Adam...I've got to make sure they don't get him.'

She glanced back briefly, putting her arm around Adam again as she held him close to her upper thigh, pressing his body against her leg, making it clear that she wasn't going to let him go.

"We have our orders from the Queen of the Realm," a guptagati replied, fingering her spear as they stepped cautiously closer, closing in on them, "To immediately seek out and apprehend two intruders who have come from the Outside World."

"That's *you* two," rasped the other guptagati, pointing at them with her spear, "So you will come with us painlessly....or we will force you...painfully."

As much as Adam wanted to stick up for himself and help Mila out, their sheer size, as well as their menacing energy, made him feel that perhaps he'd truly need to start relying on Mila for a change. He gripped her thigh tightly, his hands sinking into her soft flesh as he looked up at her, trying to somehow channel any strength to her through his gaze. As it was, he only felt tiny and rather pathetic, and a sense of helplessness shot through him. He wanted to help Mila – really, he did – but he was so outmatched by the current situation that all he could do was clutch her thigh and hope that these two frightening women would leave them in peace.

Mila glanced down at Adam, making eye contact, and she nodded at him, pursing her pretty lips together as she attempted to silently reassure him. The truth was that she felt an almost-sickening wave of fear course through her as she perceived the guptagatis closing in from both sides, but this wave of fear only lasted an instant, and, despite the dire situation, Mila found it within herself to smile down at Adam, even giving him a knowing, confident wink. The young D&D girl from a few hours ago would never have been able to muster up this kind of confidence, but Mila could feel herself changing in this new world.

"Just try and keep behind me," she breathed down at Adam confidently as she winked, "I'm not going to let them take you."

"Come...!" barked one of the guptagatis, jabbing her spear close to Mila's face, "NOW!"

And then, Mila suddenly knew that she had to act first. She couldn't be the one to let them get the upper hand. In a flash, she grabbed the pointed head of the spear and yanked it, nearly pulling it straight out of the guptagati's hand. The black-haired figure rasped angrily and hissed, trying to pull the spear back. But Mila was too strong, and, squeezing and jerking with her hand, she broke the sharp tip completely off, and then had the presence of mind to suddenly let go, sending the guptagati flying backward from her own momentum. At the same time, the other

guptagati was swinging her spear towards Adam, the blunt end aimed at his head to stun him or knock him unconscious. But, just in time, Mila reached out and blocked the impact with her bare forearm, directly in front of his face. The spear broke into pieces, both from the sheer force of the guptagati's swing, and also from the solid strength of Mila's arm. She swept Adam behind her, nearly taking him off his feet with her gesture, as she advanced on the guptagati, her fists raised.

"You two made a mistake coming here," Mila growled, shocking herself with the intensity of her voice, which wasn't even trembling, "A BIG mistake."

The guptagati that had staggered backwards across the room smashed into a tavern table, leaving its middle-aged male occupants sprawled on the ground, knocked out from the impact. The lone conscious patron struggled to his feet and sped for the large tavern door, frantically beckoning all the other patrons to leave. Within moments, the tavern was empty except for the two guptagatis, the barmaid, Mila, and Adam. As she rose back up to her feet, the guptagati wiped the blood from her face, projecting her anger on the fallen men on the ground.

"Weak, tiny men!" she hissed, "Useless...useless!"

With her fists up, Mila suddenly wondered if the men that had been knocked out were somehow connected to the guptagatis, whether they had potentially been in the pub as spies. Or maybe the guptagati was just out with little men in general...she couldn't really tell. But right now, the other woman was going straight for Adam, extending out her clawed hands towards him, her sharp black nails menacing. He stumbled backward, bravely trying to defend himself, but the guptagati was easily two whole feet taller than him, with arms nearly as thick as his legs. He didn't stand a chance against her...until....

WHAM

Mila connected a devastating right hook into the side of the guptagati's head, sending her spinning backwards, hissing and spitting angrily. Her partner had gotten back on her feet and was stalking toward Adam.

"Come here little boy," she hissed, her dark eyes flashing red suddenly at him – and Adam felt himself momentarily spellbound, almost like she was hypnotizing him – but then, he felt the warm, strong, reassuring force of Mila's thick thigh against his little body, and the next moment she had swept in front of him, defending him from the incoming sinister figure.

"You can't have him!" Mila shouted, her voice rising in strength and power the more she used it, her big fists raised again, "You're no match for me...BOTH of you! You may be huge to him...but to me, you're tiny!"

She ducked a blow from the guptagati's right hand, and swung her big leg around, connecting with the firm flesh of the woman's hip, just as she used her opposite hand to land a blow on her

jaw. The guptagati cried out, stumbling backward, before falling to the floor in a heap next to her partner. Both of them stared up at Mila, their eyes hateful...but, for the first time, actually fearful as well. As they both rose to their feet, their stances had markedly changed; no longer outwardly aggressive, they were beginning to slowly back away, though their faces were still twisted up in anger. The smaller of the two hid behind the larger one, nodding up to her as she produced a vial from her belt. The larger one spoke:

"You may be strong, girlie...but we have other ways of getting what we want."

The smaller guptagati appeared to be mixing something into a vile, a misty, glowing concoction that radiated a sinister purple glow. Before either Mila or Adam could react, the guptagati had completed whatever her concoction was, which now was glowing even brighter with that uneasy, swirling purple. She brandished the vial, aiming it at Adam as she whispered dark, indecipherable words into the vial's opening. The swirling purple became a vapor, and, pursing her lips, the guptagati blew it straight across the room, directly into Adam's face

"No...Adam...!!" exclaimed Mila. She reached down, not even really thinking coherently, and grasped Adam by the scruff of his shirt. The next moment, she had lifted him clean off his feet, using only one hand, yanking him out of the sparkling purple cloud of strange vapor. At the same time, the other guptagati had charged her right flank, having decided that this was the best moment to attack.

But now...Mila was angry. She didn't know if Adam was okay or what he had just breathed in, but whatever it was, she felt like she shouldn't have allowed it to happen. Gritting her teeth, she met the other guptagati head-on, getting ahold of her dark hair and beginning to jerk her around, back and forth. The guptagati yelled out, hissing in pain, but Mila just kept manhandling her, tossing her left and right by her hair, until she finally threw her straight into her partner. For the second time, the two guptagatis were in a heap on the floor, only this time, they were both a bit slower to get up.

"Adam...Adam...are you okay!?" asked Mila, still holding him in midair as she shook him, "What was that??"

Adam was already starting to feel a bit lightheaded, and only managed to muster out:

"I...I don't know, but I feel...I feel woozy..."

The next moment, Adam collapsed onto the floor with a light thud, unconscious. Mila frantically bent down to check his pulse, and was partially relieved that she could feel his heart beating. The guptagatis were snickering to each other, clearly heartened that their job, whatever it was, had been completed. Mila felt a blind rage seize her, and, leaving Adam where he lay, she bolted across the room like lightning.

“Oh...you think it's funny!?” she intoned, her voice indeed shaking now...not with fear...with anger. Her hands shot down, and she pulled both guptagatis up by their hair, lifting them up *off the floor completely*, and was too furious to marvel at the fact that she was actually THAT strong. She hardly even knew what she was doing, and the next moment, she had smashed their heads into each other, before dragging them both along the dusty pub floor, towards the wall. Even though the guptagatis were both now obviously hurt, they were still snickering to each other. They either couldn't feel pain much, or didn't mind it too much...or perhaps they even liked it. Mila didn't care either way. Her mind was almost blank from how angry she was. Gritting her teeth again, she bent down, wrapping her big hands around each of their necks, one by one, before hoisting them both up against the wall at the same time. It was incredible – she was holding two 7'0-plus amazons up by their necks, with their feet well over a foot off the ground, pressing them hard into the wall as she scowled up at them.

“What did you do to him!?” she demanded, shaking them both in place, “What was that purple smoke?? Is it going to kill him!? Because I swear if he dies...”

But she was interrupted by the snickering guptagatis, laughing as they completed each others' sentences:

“He will live....he will live...mmmm, but a cursed life it will be...”

“Oh surely...a cursed life...indeed!”

“We know you like short men...”

“Judging from how you panicked over him...”

Mila's grip tightened. The air into the women's lungs became more constricted. Mila's grip didn't let up, and, surprisingly, it was the larger of the two guptagatis who fell into unconsciousness first. The sight of her larger partner becoming immobile made the smaller woman start to talk with more haste, the fear widening in her eyes.

“Will you tell me now?!” growled Mila, threatening to tighten her grip even more around the woman's throat.

“I will tell you! I will tell you!!” the guptagati cried out, her normally-raspy voice suddenly becoming more high-pitched and feminine as she put her hands up to her face, shaking them in a motion of surrender.

“Your little boy will live...but he is cursed...with a spell that is not easily reversed. He is already tiny, yes...already tiny...”

Mila felt relief wash over her, hearing that Adam hadn't been poisoned or something...but cursed!? That didn't sound much better.

“So what if he's tiny?” Mila snarled up at the guptagati, “I...I LIKE him that way!”

No sooner had Mila spoken those words that she felt, strangely, how true they really were. She LIKED having Adam be much shorter, smaller, and weaker than herself...she didn't really know why...but it was definitely true. The thought of protecting him, shielding him, taking care of him, was very appealing to her. But the guptagati, despite her obvious distress, was grinning down at her now...not a nice grin.

“Mmmm, if that is true,” the guptagati smirked, “Then I just made you very happy...because your little boy is going to start slowly shrinking...getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller, with each passing day. Not all at once! But verrrry, very slowly...shorter, skinnier, smaaaaaaller...and the smaller he gets, the more vulnerable to us he becomes. So we'll be watching and waiting. You can try to hide. But we'll find you. And, when you least expect it, we'll snatch him away from you...and bring him to our Queen...who will deal with him in her...own way.”

The bigger guptagati had started waking up, and Mila's face twisted up, starting to tighten her hands on their throats again.

“You won't take him away if I kill you both...” she growled up at them, “Right now!”

But before she could start to REALLY squeeze, the frightened voice of Mantissa, the bartender, came to her ears:

“Mila....no! Don't do it! You can't kill them....not like that! Not with your bare hands! And the army will hunt you down! Please...Mila...just let them go...they've done what they came here to do. They won't do any more.”

Mila took a few deep breaths and stepped back, letting the guptagatis both drop down into a crumpled heap on the floor. Laughing and hissing, both in pain and pleasure, they hurriedly staggered up and whisked themselves out of the pub, with one last parting word for Mila:

“Be on your guard, warrior...” spat the smaller one in mocking contempt, “We're coming for him!”

“And we'll get him!” hissed the other, pointing with her long, sharp black nail, “You cannot hide...cannot hide...”

Mila watched them slink out of the tavern, her face hardened, and her fists still balled up and trembling slightly. But her attention was quickly diverted when Adam stirred on the floor behind her. He coughed a few times and then sat up, staring blankly around. Mila and Mantissa came rushing over, bending down to administer to him.

“Adam...Adam, oh thank god, you're conscious....how are you feeling? Are you okay!?”

Mila's voice came out in a series of quick, concerned bursts, as she cradled his head gently to her bosom. He nodded, still regaining his senses, and, after a minute or so of petting his hair and forehead, Mila felt a sense of foreboding. It had already occurred to her that Adam looked a good bit smaller in her arms...tinier, skinnier, frailer...but still the cutest, most precious little thing. But now that he seemed to be okay, something inside her told her to stand him up...and so she did, rising up to her full height as well. The next moment, her hand had gone over her mouth.

"Adam...oh god...your head...! It....the, uh...you're staring straight into the bottom part of my hips! You...you shrank! Are you SURE you feel okay!?"

Her eyes were heavy with concern, but she also couldn't help but think that he looked EXTRA cute all the way down there.

Adam was still dazed, and he looked up at Mila, dumbfounded, as the reality of his diminishment slowly began to dawn on him.

"Wh-what the heck just happened?" he blurted out at her, "You're...you're even taller now! Am I going crazy!?" He glanced quickly over to Mantissa, who had a sad smile on her face as she shook her head.

"No...no, you're not going crazy, Adam," said Mila softly, bending down toward him in a crouch – it was incredible, even bent all the way down this way, she was still a head taller than him. Mila was surprised by her own tone; she would have expected to be out of breath and still fuming from the guptagati fight, but no...she actually felt quite calm right now. And somehow, she understood that it was incumbent upon her to be gentle and sweet to Adam, to help ease him into this new reality.

"But you ARE smaller, you know," she added in that same gentle tone, reaching out to brush his little cheek with her big hand, "A LOT smaller, actually...mmmm, but you're still cute, Adam...you know that?"

She cracked a smile at him, knowing that this might have seemed like an odd moment for such a remark. But it was true! And, in any case, she felt like they needed a bit of a comedown after that last intense encounter.

"Mmmmm, here, Adam," she purred, feeling very motherly toward him, as he seemed quite disoriented, "Give me your hands."

From her crouched position, still a good 10 inches taller than him, Mila took Adam's hands in hers, gently kneading and massaging them reassuringly, all while staring into his eyes.

"Ooooo...wow, look at that," she murmured, half to him and half to herself, glancing down, "Look at how small your hands are compared to mine, Adam...that's...that's incredible!"

Not even really knowing what she was doing, except to try and diffuse some tension, she smiled at him and held up his hand to hers, marveling at how the top of his fingers didn't even come up to her middle knuckle...not even close. Her hand wrapped easily around his wrist...so, so easily. Mila felt a sudden heated throb in between her legs, and took a deep breath, not really understanding what was going on inside her head. But she just had to make sure he was okay.

"Talk to me," she cooed at him sweetly, "I want to hear how you're feeling."

Meanwhile, Mantissa had returned, her prodigious curves jiggling with her movements, and was bending down to hand Adam a shot glass full of something pink and spritzy.

"A tonic of bitters," she explained, "You should drink that down straight away...it'll help with the nausea of the shrinking spell."

Looking up at the barmaid, Adam was struck by how big SHE was as well. Of course, Mila was in a league of her own, but Mantissa, with her solid, strong, curvy body, was no slouch herself. The sheer size of these two women who were flanking him...it was all making Adam a bit misty-headed, even as he was coming out of the recent haze of the spell. He was just soooo small...so runty compared to them...and even though the thought of being so puny was discouraging, he felt a strange kind of intrigue flaring up inside him. Mila and Mantissa...they both looked *amazing*.

"Well?" Mantissa's voice cut through his reveries, "Are you going to drink it or just stare at it?"

Adam blinked, his mind still playing catch-up as he gaped up at the barmaid.

"Aw, poor little thing's still a bit stunned," Mantissa hummed kindly. With sudden swiftness, she bent down, pulled Adam's head back, and poured the shot into his open mouth. Adam began to cough a little as Mantissa patted him helpfully on the back.

"Did you need to be so rough?" Mila asked, a little annoyed.

"Oh he'll be fine, my beauty," Mantissa chuckled, standing back up, "It was important to get that tincture in him, though. Gupta spells are a nasty business, nothing to mess around with."

Mila nodded, understanding that Mantissa had been helpful, and then finally rose to her feet as well, so that she was now very much looking DOWN on the barmaid, on Adam...on everything. Even this tavern itself, which had clearly been built to accommodate the 7-foot figures of the guptagatis, was small for her, and Mila could feel the top of her head pressing up against the ceiling.

“So...” Mila began uncertainly, addressing Mantissa, “Where should we stay for the night? It’s getting late. We obviously can’t stay HERE...since I’m afraid those women will be back, especially at night.”

“You’re right to fear them,” the bartender nodded, still evidently amazed by how huge Mila was, standing there at her full height, “But clearly not for the same reason WE all do...we’re afraid of their size and strength, but I can see that such things are no issue for you.”

“No issue at all,” Mila chuckled, shaking her head back and forth, before swooping her arm down and sweeping Adam off his feet, into the crook of her arm. At this size, it was such a natural thing for her to do that she hardly even thought about it. All she was concerned with right now was finding some place safe to sleep for the night, where they could hide away and not be found, “But you say I should still be afraid of them? Why?”

“Because,” answered Mantissa, her eyes full of genuine concern as she stared at them both, “The guptagatis are not merely the hand of the Queen through power and force alone...they also are her eyes and ears. They are specialists at covert action too, you see. They sneak through alleyways; they glide and creep through the streets at night; they climb in through open windows...any door that sits unbolted, they will find. They are experts in the art of stealth, Mila...and so you must always...ALWAYS...find safe places to sleep at night, where you can keep HIM safe.”

She pointed straight down at Adam.

“I’m not worried about YOU, Mila. Clearly YOU can take care of yourself. But him...even BEFORE he was shrunk, he didn’t stand a chance against them. And if the guptas get their hands on him, and bring him to the Queen...you may never see him again.”

Mila set her jaw tight, turning to Adam and running her huge hand through his hair.

“Well, we’re just not going to let that happen, now, are we?” she smiled at him, even though, in her heart, she was worried. She turned back down to the bartender. “Tell me....do you know of anywhere we can stay for the night? Somewhere safe? Where they won’t find us?”

The bartender looked left and right, then, confident that the tavern was empty, nodded.

“There’s an upper room in the monastery here,” she whispered, “A private storeroom of the monks...they almost never go up there...there are no windows, and the way inside is only through a series of two doors, both of which are heavily bolted at night. And you can even hide deep in the room, behind full sacks of spices...it smells good in there too...they won’t find you.”

The bartender leaned up towards Mila, still whispering.

"We all *despise* the Queen, who rules with an iron fist here. The monks are allowed to keep to themselves, because of the services they provide, and the belief that their building is sacred. I know the chief abbess there...she will let you stay in the upper room. The trick, though, is getting there. We should wait until just after darkness, when the guptas won't see us so easily...another 30 minutes or so...until we hear the chapel bell toll for the nightwatch to come out on the street. Then we can go."

"Mmm, how about it, Adam?" Mila asked, turning to him, smiling, feeling a strange kind of euphoria for the adventure, "Sleeping in a locked, secret attic of an old monastery, behind some big fat bags of spices...with your 8'0 old best friend, hrmmm?"

She winked at him, nuzzling his nose with hers and laughing. Despite the seriousness of their situation, Mila felt a strange buoyancy, a kind of giddiness for adventure and intrigue, and that, coupled with her arousal at Adam's smaller size, made her feel almost flirty.

"S-Sounds...sounds almost like D&D!" Adam managed to respond, despite his lightheadedness, smiling up at Mila as she held him in the crook of her powerful arm.