

ELLA OF EVERLAST

THE EVERLAST CHRONICLES

J. T. WILKERSON

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For Gabbie

You are the bravest person I know.

Never stop shining your light.

Therein lies your magic.



PROLOGUE

“In a time long forgotten, there lived a little girl who was all alone in a world that never felt like her home. She lived in a large house with many lost children. In that world, I believe they call it an orphanage. There were no mothers or fathers there, just teachers and supervising adults who cared very little for the girl. She couldn’t remember how she got there. She had only a strange note that accompanied her in her basket when she was found on the doorstep as a baby. In the note, there were odd symbols that seemed like nonsense to everyone who looked upon them—everyone except for the girl.

From the moment she could talk, she would read the note aloud for all to hear. All of the adults thought she was making up stories. Even the other children didn’t believe her. But as the years went on, the message remained the same:

Please take care of our precious daughter, Janitui Madadenza. She is the princess of Everlast. We will return for her when the time is right and richly compensate you for your service.

Princess *Janitui* was too odd of a name and no one in that world quite felt like remembering how to say it. So eventually, both the children and the workers at the orphanage began to call the little girl Princess Jane, as a kind of cruel jesting. And even when they weren’t poking fun, the

name Jane seemed to stick. They would often curtsy and bow before her, mocking the girl for insisting that she was of royalty. It left Jane feeling isolated and downhearted.”

Kayko sat comfortably in the armchair next to her daughter’s bed. She was the perfect storyteller—graceful and commanding, her voice rich with magic, her posture perfectly poised. The glow from the bedside lamp painted soft gold on her face, while moonlight spilled across the blankets. Ella’s small hands clutched the corner of her covers, her eyes wide with expectation as her mother’s voice rolled like music through the quiet room.

“They were mean to Princess Jane, Momma. If I were there, I would have kicked them.” Ella’s little fists tightened under the blanket, and she gave a decisive nod that made her golden curls bounce.

“Ella, that’s not nice,” said Kayko.

“But *they* weren’t being nice to Princess Jane.” The child crossed her arms, lower lip jutting forward in defiance.

“Yes, but I think Princess Jane needed a friend more than she needed to see someone kick the other kids.”

“Then I would have been her friend, that way she wouldn’t get lonely.”

“Now that’s the right heart, Ladybug,” Kayko said, leaning forward to brush a curl from her daughter’s forehead. “I think you would have been a good friend to Princess Jane. In fact, I think you could have been a good friend to *all* the kids in that orphanage.”

“Yeah, but they were being unkind, Momma.”

“That’s because they didn’t know what it felt like to be loved. And what’s worse, they didn’t have any hope.”

“No hope? That’s sad, Momma. Did Princess Jane have hope?”

“A little, but it was fading more and more with every setting sun. But then, one day when she was sitting by herself under a tree, a door in the sky opened and out galloped a Unicorn!”

Ella gasped, sitting straight up. “A Unicorn!” she squealed. “I wish *I* could meet a Unicorn one day!”

Kayko chuckled softly, her voice lilting like wind through leaves. “Well, Unicorns typically show up when things are at their very worst. I hope you never have to live in times like that. But, if dark days do come, I pray The Awe does send you a Unicorn.”

“Yeah! And maybe a Wizard too!” added Ella.

“And maybe a Wizard too,” echoed Kayko with a smile.

“Momma, what did Princess Jane do when she met the Unicorn?”

“Well, Princess Jane had lived in the human world for most of her life. So, she didn’t know about Unicorns yet. Nor did she know of Wizards, or Piddles or Giants or—”

“Or us?” interrupted Ella.

“That’s right. She didn’t know about Fara like us either,” confirmed Kayko. “She didn’t even know what *she* was.”

Ella scrunched up her nose. “Momma... I thought people in the humans-world were different. Didn’t they see her tall Everyn ears? Or the light in her forehead?”

Kayko smiled softly, her eyes far away, as if she were seeing that world herself. “It is different in that world, Bug. So different that their eyes can’t see the things of our world. It’s like their hearts forgot how. So if someone from our world walked by, they’d just think they looked normal.”

Ella blinked at the ceiling, imagining a world so dull it couldn’t see magic. “That sounds boring,” she muttered. She wanted to know more about rainbows and Unicorns—for even in her world were these mysterious and magical things. “What did the Unicorn say to her?” she asked, eyes wide again.

“Well, Unicorns are matter-of-fact kinds of creatures, and they like to get straight to the point. So, it walked right up to the girl and said, ‘Princess

Janitui, your world is in peril and your parents are in grave danger. I have come to bring you back home. For only you can defeat the shadow and save our world.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Ella. “What did Princess Jane do?”

Kayko leaned in close, lowering her voice to a whisper. “She thought she was dreaming. She even pinched herself... like this!”

She reached over and gave Ella’s side a playful pinch, then dove in for a tickle attack. Ella burst into laughter, kicking and twisting under the covers.

“Momma!” Ella protested playfully.

“Okay, okay... but now you know this isn’t a dream,” Kayko teased, her smile softening. “You can never be too sure, you know. Princess Jane had to be sure too. But once she was convinced, she did the bravest thing she’d ever done... She decided to have faith.”

Ella tilted her head in childlike curiosity before asking, “What’s faith, Momma?”

Kayko paused, her gaze drifting to the moonlight shimmering across the wall. “Faith is when you have complete trust in something, even when you can’t see it. Even when you don’t know how it will all work out. But you believe in it with all your heart—so much so that you might even do something that doesn’t make sense to other people.”

“What did Princess Jane do with *her* faith?”

“*Her faith*? Her faith gave her the courage to mount that Unicorn and gallop into the unknown world of Everlast.”

“Everlast, that’s our world!” roared Ella with pride.

Kayko laughed. “Yes, but it was much different back then. When Jane entered our world, it was a dark and scary place. She found herself surrounded by evil shadows and strange creatures she’d never seen before. She felt powerless and afraid.”

“But she didn’t give up! Did she, Momma?”

“That’s right, she didn’t give up! With her Unicorn by her side, Princess Jane faced the darkness. She gathered all the courage she could, and she fought it.”

“Even though she didn’t have magical powers?”

“Mmm hmm—even without magical powers. Living in the world of men so long, her magic didn’t have a chance to develop. But that didn’t stop her. You want to know why?”

“Why?” asked Ella.

“Because deep inside her heart, she knew that it was the power of The Awe, our creator, that was going to save the day—not her own strength.” Kayko rubbed her daughter’s shoulder as her smile beamed upon little Ella’s countenance.

Ella, who had decided she wasn’t sleepy yet, was ready to ask more questions. But just then they heard a knock at her open bedroom door.

A large, burly shadow moved across the doorway, followed by a familiar voice and a thick red beard.

“Papa!” exclaimed Ella.

“Ella, are you dragging out your bedtime story again?” her father, Algon, asked with arched brows as he leaned on the doorframe.

“Noooo,” replied Ella in a sing-song fashion.

Her father tilted his head with a more serious gaze, as if asking the question again.

“Well, maybe... just a little,” admitted Ella with a giggle.

“See, honey, she gets you every time,” said Algon, glancing at his wife, Kayko, with mock accusation.

Kayko chuckled through her melodic breathing before admitting, “I know. But I should let you know, my love... you don’t fare much better in this arena,” she teased.

Algon chuckled and stepped closer, the floorboards creaking beneath his boots. He bent down, brushing a kiss against her cheek.

Kayko reached for his large hand. She kissed it before looking up at him and saying, "I love you."

"Ewww," giggled Ella. "When I get married, I'm never gonna kiss my husband!" she bantered.

"Ladybug, I don't think it works that way," chuckled Kayko.

"Uh huh. Princess Jane didn't go around kissing husbands and she got to be queen one day."

"Well, *Queen* Jane eventually got married. And she had no problem at all *kissing her husband*," rebutted Kayko.

"Yuck! Papa, I don't have to get married, do I?" whined Ella.

"No, Bug," Algon chuckled, rubbing his beard. "You don't ever have to fall in love. I totally support your decision to not get married so you don't have to leave your old man all alone."

Kayko shot him a look; upon seeing it, Algon threw up his hands in mock surrender. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding," he said through his portly laugh.

"So... does that mean that I do have to get married?" asked Ella.

"It means," interrupted Kayko, straightening up with that knowing-mom tone, "that you have to stop asking questions and go to bed."

Algon attempted to join his wife in being serious. "Your mother's right, Bug. It's time for you to go to bed."

"Okay, Papa," conceded Ella. "But can I just ask one more question?" she asked.

Algon and Kayko gave her a stern look, but Ella pleaded, "Please!"

Algon looked at Kayko with a face that said, *I can't resist her*. Kayko smiled and joined his surrender.

"Okay, one more question," she said.

Ella's face lit up for a heartbeat—one more question, one more chance to linger in the story she loved. But as the thought formed, her joy softened. She bit her lip, eyes lowering just a little, like she was afraid of the answer even as she asked it.

“Did Princess Jane ever get to have magic? Or did she stay powerless... forever?”

This was indeed a serious question, and Ella's parents knew that they had to give their daughter an answer.

Kayko opened her mouth, but Algon stepped forward, lowering himself beside Ella's bed. He rested his big hand on her small blanket-covered knee and looked at his wife with a gentle nod—*I got this one.*

Kayko smiled at her husband and sat back, giving him the floor.

“Ladybug,” he began, voice soft as a hum, “our creator used Princess Jane just how she was. He didn't choose the strongest, nor the wisest. He didn't look for a powerful Wizard or a Giant—”

“Or a Mer-maiden!” added Ella.

“That's right. Not even a Mer-maiden! Our creator looked down and saw a little girl who was all alone—with no magic. And you know what He did?”

“What, Papa?”

“He said, ‘I think I'll choose her.’ Not because she was magical, but because she was willing.”

“Maybe He'll choose me too, Papa...because I don't have magical powers either,” Ella reasoned, her voice small.

Algon shook his head. “No, Bug. He'll choose you, but *not* because you *don't* have magic.”

“Then why, Papa?”

“He'll choose you because... you have *faith*.”

“Faith... just like Princess Jane!” exclaimed Ella.

“Just like Princess Jane,” added Kayko.

Then she and her husband leaned in to give Ella forehead kisses. Ella’s parents then bid their daughter goodnight and tiptoed toward the door.

Ella watched their silhouettes melt into the light on the other side. Her heart was full, and a smile rested upon her face as she sank comfortably into her covers.

The room was completely still now, save for the hum of crickets outside her window.

Ella closed her eyes and thought of Unicorns, quests, and how little girls could become heroes if they only had faith. Then, with all her heart, she turned her spirit toward The Awe and whispered into the quiet, “I’m willing. I have faith.”

Then a hush swept through the room. The curtains trembled gently, and the night seemed to pause, as if The Awe Himself were leaning in close, just to listen to her.



ELLA AND THE STRANGE BOY

Ella and The Strange Boy

Ella was galloping upon Tamerik through the forest when she saw him down in the distance. *What an odd boy*, she thought as she watched him pace back and forth. She wondered if he too would be a student at the Great Oak come this Autumn. Ella thought to herself that it would be nice to not be the only odd *Fara* in the school—not to be confused with *fairy*. Because no one in Everlast ever said, *It would be nice to not be the only odd FAIRY in the school*. Furthermore, the Fara people absolutely loathe being called *fairies*—a pretentious and condescending human term. It is a word that conjures pictures of bug-sized Pixie girls with tattered dresses and incomprehensible voices that jingle instead of speak.

What utter nonsense.

And nonsense has no place in this story. This story—that is to say, *our* story—starts with a Fara girl named Ella and her giant wolf protector, adventuring through the Alvarian forest of Everlast.

Tamerik had been enjoying the run. He loved the feel of the forest floor through his paws, the patterns of light through the trees, and the smell of the dirt as it scraped over moss-covered roots. He lived for the friction of the chase. It was wild jackalopes today—horned rabbits as big as ponies,

swift with stealth. How Tamerik loved the hunt! Which is why he was now annoyed, for Ella had stopped the adventure to inspect the strange Fara boy below.

“Had I not pledged an oath to your father, I could be hunting blue buffalo in the Wild Plains right about now,” he said loftily. “But I suppose a promise is a promise,” he ended in an exhale of playful submission.

No one knew why he had pledged that oath to Ella’s father. And Ella never thought it her place to ask. Whatever the reason, Tamerik was ever protective of Ella. Indeed, he loved her—in his wolf-way.

What an odd pair they made though. Tamerik was terrifying, even among his own pack. Most animals in Everlast are twice the size of those from our world, but Tamerik was nearly twice the size of most Everlastian wolves. Thick, choppy black hair crowned his head like a lion’s mane, and his snout was strongly supported by sharp, curved fangs that, ever so often, were revealed through the curl of his snarl. His large, dark stature would intimidate the most courageous of heroes. But, no doubt, they’d instantly find comfort in the gentleness of his pale blue eyes.

Tamerik turned away playfully to continue onward. The forest trail was calling him, but Ella tugged at his fur.

“Not yet, Tamerik. Wait just a minute,” she said as she watched the strange Fara boy. It didn’t take a genius for her to figure out that he was a wind-fara. For whenever he fluttered, in place of wings there were only winds of gale exuding from his back—as with all wind-fara. But the biggest indicator was the fact that he was literally throwing gusts of wind at the Veil.

He was strong—so strong that the Veil glimmered with vibrations. Ella wondered why a Fara with that much power and skill would waste his time trying to break the Veil. He was obviously well-taught, so he should have known the Crystal Veil was unbreakable—and why would anyone want to

break it, anyway? It served as both protection and beauty in Everlast. It had stood guard against the darkness for a hundred years, and in that time, it had become part of the world. So why was this boy attacking it?

“What is he trying to do?” Ella mumbled to herself.

Tamerik grumbled in that way only wolves can; he was unimpressed and starting to get bored—which was never ideal: wolves hunt when they’re bored.

Not to worry, thought Tamerik. *I would not eat a fara, even on the worst of days.*

He lowered himself to sit, gazing across the hill at the busy boy and the Crystal Veil. The Fara boy was frantically moving about the border, flying up and down, left to right, as he hurled wind vibrations at the shimmering wall. Tamerik and Ella watched him from their vantage point.

“How absolutely foolish,” Ella remarked from atop Tamerik’s back. “That Veil is meant to protect us from... from...” She stammered, pondering what truly lay beyond it. “Probably monsters!” she finally blurted.

Of course it was all speculation—no one had ever made it clear what they were actually being veiled from. All Ella knew was that for the past hundred years, the Veil had protected her world from every terrible thing her imagination could conjure. Still, a part of her always wondered what was really on the other side.

With a frustrated sigh, she said, “If that boy *were* actually able to open the Veil, The Awe only knows what evil he’d be letting into Everlast! And who gave him the right!” she exclaimed.

Tamerik sighed and turned away toward the forest path, as if to say, *What has any of this to do with me?*

Ella pulled back on his fur, but Tamerik was no domestic beast. He was as wild as a lion and as stubborn as a rhinotaur. He couldn’t be made to do anything. Persuaded—maybe. Flattered—perhaps. But never made.

Ella slid off Tamerik and fluttered around to face him. Her thin wings struggled to balance her, and she wobbled a bit before plopping to the ground in a most ungraceful landing. Her amber-gold eyes made her look like a lioness against her toasted sand-colored skin—not quite as warm as her mother’s, but certainly not the pale palette of her father’s. But she did get his freckles...perhaps his wings too.

Of this, she could never really be sure. She had never truly seen her father’s wings before—no one had. Something about an accident and amnesia. It was all very unclear, spoken of in vague explanations that never quite explained anything at all. But Ella figured—her wings had to come from somewhere. And since her mother’s patterned pinions were perfect, she reasoned that she must have taken after her father in that area.

After all, he was broken too. A flightless Fara with no ability to wield the elements—a Fara without magic. Just like her.

And perhaps magic was what Ella longed for most. After all, plenty of creatures in Everlast couldn’t fly, and she could at least glide. But everyone had some kind of magic. The Gnomes had the magic of the forest. The Piddles could heal the trees. Even the Pods had the gift of speech—which may not seem like much, that is until you understand that Pods are mushrooms and plants that, one day, through the gift of The Awe, began to move and speak.

And then there were *her* people, the Fara. How she longed to wield the elements of the world like the rest of them. That longing was almost enough to drive her to despair. But it never did. Because Ella’s heart was too full of love, too driven by adventure—and how loved she truly was by her mother and father. And as for adventure, Tamerik made sure she had that in abundance

So her clumsy dismount from the giant wolf wasn’t so bad after all. In fact, they shared a good laugh when she stumbled.

But Tamerik quickly returned to his act of defiance—protesting this boring investigation of this even more boring boy. With his back still turned to the Veil and head facing the forest trail, he steadied his resolve.

“Tam-er-ick!” Ella whined. “Come on! Pleeease?” she pleaded, her voice a pitchy, youthful grumble.

Tamerik sighed, seemingly unmoved. But in truth, he loved this game. He knew Ella would soon leave to study at the Great Oak, just as most Fara youth did when they turned fourteen. Ella would leave him behind to grow up. Sure, she would come back someday, but not as the same girl she was now. And while the new Ella would bring new adventures, oh how he would miss the one he had today.

Ella huffed. “Ugh! You never do anything I want to do! You know, I’m going to be flown away to the Great Oak soon—that’s *three years* you’ll be without me. Three long, boring years! You just watch—you’ll wish with all your pointy teeth that you’d been nicer to me today!”

She launched into a melodramatic monologue as she tried in vain to push Tamerik back around toward the boy. Tamerik rolled his eyes, sank down with his paws crossed, and held his head high in proud defiance. Ella fluttered behind him, exasperated. Perhaps their game of wills could have lasted much longer had Ella not turned to check on the bizarre boy at the Veil.

But she did.

By then, the boy’s gusting had subsided. His frantic billowing paused as he turned away from the Veil in frustration, studying a discolored parchment clutched in his hands. Ella observed from a distance as he squinted at the mysterious writing, mumbling equations and chanting words that sounded like nonsense to her ears. Whatever he read had enthralled him so completely that he failed to notice a shadowy vapor seeping through the

Veil farther along the border. It moved like smoke but felt as predatory as a serpent.

Ella stared as it swelled larger, taking on the haunting form of a giant, villainous hand. Though it had no eyes, she sensed it was hunting. A butterfly, unnoticed until now on the forest floor, flitted into the air a few spans from that malevolent shadow-hand. Ella watched in growing alarm as, without warning, the hand's palm turned toward the creature. Like a viper zeroing in on its prey, its long, spider-like fingers stretched out for the butterfly—and then...

"Oh no!" Ella gasped in horror, the whispered words still trapped in her mouth. The heinous hand had snatched the monarch right out of the world.

Ella blinked, hoping she was seeing things—that perhaps the butterfly was still caught somewhere within the shadow's clutches. But she quickly arrived at the truth—

The butterfly was gone. In its place lay an odd pile of colorful feathers.

And now, the hand fixed its attention on the meddling boy who was off in the distance, still conducting his experiments.

"It's going for the boy," Ella whispered under her breath. A rush of terror flooded her veins as she spun back toward Tamerik. She hastily grabbed at his fur. "Hurry, Tamerik! We have to help him!"

At first, Tamerik still thought they were in their little bantering game. But Ella's final, desperate "Please!" cut through his playful notion. A chill pricked at Tamerik's spine as he caught the fear in her voice—enough to awaken the fierce guardian in him.

Ella leapt from the high hill, pumping her thin, clumsy wings with all her might. She did her best, but found herself higher up than her wings could handle. The wind whipped against her face, and within moments she began to drop.

Tamerik reacted with lightning speed. Quick as instinct, he dashed forward and snatched her right out of the air. His teeth were like razors in iron jaws, yet Ella barely felt the pressure of the catch. With a graceful bound, Tamerik landed down by the Crystal Veil.

Heart pounding, Ella fluttered out of his grasp, trembling from the sudden drop. She gulped for air as Tamerik's warm tongue brushed her cheek. Looking up at him, she managed a shaky smile of gratitude. She didn't need words—Tamerik could hear *Thank you* in the golden shine of her glassy eyes. In turn, Tamerik nodded his great head and smiled back gently

But there was no time to rest. Out of the corner of his eye, Tamerik saw the dark hand creeping closer, its smoky tendrils coiling like a hungry serpent.

Ella followed his gaze, then looked toward the boy. "Tamerik...the boy!" Her tone held a sudden maturity—gone was the whiny teen chatter from before.

Tamerik bumped her with his nose in affirmation, and Ella climbed up onto his back. Without delay, they galloped toward the unsuspecting wind-fara youth.

The sinister hand was practically upon him when Tamerik intercepted, slamming into the boy and hurling him out of reach at the very last second. The hand recoiled, as though startled.

Tamerik turned to face the shadow. His jowls curled over his long fangs, vibrating with a feral growl. Every muscle in his powerful frame locked into place—legs wide, braced for combat. For a breathless moment, it seemed the shadow would strike. Its black vapor arm slithered and swerved, gauging its foe with eerie caution.

Then, abruptly—without reason or warning—it twisted back behind the Crystal Veil from where it first appeared.

Ella, still perched on Tamerik, stared in stunned silence, both of them struggling to understand what they had just seen. The butterfly was gone—devoured by darkness. But why? And where did those feathers come from?

Ella rubbed Tamerik's fur. Through his choppy black locks, she could feel the thump of his heart. It was faster than usual—which wasn't usual at all. Tamerik was always calm, even in the gravest of moments. So what was it about this one that had him so on edge?

The forest fell quiet, save for the panic in Ella's eyes, the odd thumping of Tamerik's heart, and the strange boy's ragged breathing as he lay sprawled on the ground in utter bewilderment.

2



ELLA AND THE NOW FURIOUS BOY

The boy emerged bruised and bewildered. It would seem that Tamerik's tossing had thrust him against an obscured boulder. He'd only a brief moment to glimpse the hand of shadow—a twinkling of a breath, really—before he was sent flying out of control and into a daze. By the time he came to, the menacing hand was gone. Too bruised to fly, he was forced to walk back toward his belongings. The white streak at the front of his dark brown hair glistened as patchwork sun pierced through the forest canopy.

Upon seeing him, Ella smiled. *Good. He's okay*, she thought to herself, relieved. This, however, could not be said of his feelings toward her.

"Are you crazy? You could've killed me!" he snarled, face turning fire-berry red. He stormed toward Ella, then suddenly froze at a sharp crunch beneath his foot. It was the parchment he'd been clutching. Quickly picking it up, he checked for damage. "*Phew!*" he breathed, relieved to see it unharmed. He stuffed it into his tunic pocket, then glared at the strange Fara girl perched atop the giant wolf. "Do you realize what you could have done!" he snapped.

Ella bristled. “What?!” She tried not to let her own frustration boil over. “It’s obvious you’re still confused from your fall. Because I’m sure the words you’re looking for are *thank you!*”

“No!” he said. “I think you don’t want to hear the words I’m looking for right now!” He stepped forward, his pale skin and the white streak in his hair lit gold by the sinking sun.

Tamerik let out a low, warning snarl. “Careful, little Fara,” he said coolly. “It would be a shame to gobble you up after having just saved your life.”

The Fara boy jumped back, alarmed. He’d never seen a Talking Beast so large—certainly not a predatory one. They weren’t allowed in Fara realms. But Fara rules didn’t apply to Alvaria. He had been warned repeatedly never to go there—yet here he was.

Ella gently stroked Tamerik’s fur and then fluttered clumsily down to meet her angry rescue. The dark beast sat tall, his eyes fixed on the young wind-fara. The air was thick with tension. The Fara lad proceeded toward Ella—still angry, yet a bit more cautious now. His right arm crossed his chest as he rubbed at the pain in his shoulder.

Ella noticed his discomfort and softened her voice. “Look, I don’t know what you’re doing out here, but—”

“That’s right!” he cut in. “You *don’t* know. But that’s what happens when you tackle first instead of asking questions.”

“Wait, we just saved your life! I mean, that *thing* was coming for you. It probably would have killed you... and *you’re* mad at *me*?!”

“It wouldn’t have killed me,” he said bitterly. “But it might’ve finally taken me to...” He trailed off, grimacing like he’d said too much. “Never mind. Just... just leave it alone.”

“Leave it alone? A giant black hand of shadow just seeped through the Crystal Veil—which is definitely *not* supposed to happen—and you want me to leave it alone? Why aren’t you alarmed by this?”

“Because,” he sighed, looking at her with weary eyes, “I’ve seen it before.”

Ella’s breath caught. “That’s funny, because it sounded like you just said this wasn’t your first time encountering that creepy shadow hand.”

“Yeah. Because *that’s* what I said.”

“What?!” Ella exclaimed, her voice pitching in disbelief. She replayed his words in her mind to make sure she’d heard him right. “When?”

“A while ago,” he answered, voice muffled as he lowered his head.

“What do you mean *a while ago*?” she snapped. “That can’t be true. Right? I mean, the Veil is what keeps us safe. The Veil is our protection. The Veil is—”

“Failing,” he said, raising his gaze to meet hers. “The Veil is failing.” His tone was exhausted, as though he’d repeated those words far too many times before.

Ella felt her stomach knot. If the Veil was failing, everything she knew was at risk. “Okay, so we really need to tell someone about this!”

“*We* don’t need to do anything,” he said flatly, scooping dead bits of flora into a glass container. “*I* will inform the Grand Council—alone.”

“The Grand Council?” she asked with a chuckle of disbelief. “Look, I know everyone thinks that the Grand Council has time to deal with *every little problem* that arises in the Kingdom, but that’s not how it works. They are too busy dealing with *real* kingdom issues. And with the Great Slumber of the Everyn ending this year and the King and Queen awakening, there’s just no way the council will have time to talk to a... a *school boy*.”

“Well I know someone on the council, so I think I’ll be okay,” said the boy, deadpan.

Ella scoffed. “*Humph*. Even if someone in your family was an actual *lord* on the Council, they *still* might not see you... and, *I* should know.”

“Okay,” he said, clearly unimpressed.

“Okaaaay? So, what makes you think they’ll see *you*?” demanded Ella.

"Because they already have," he replied.

"Seriously? How?" She stared at him in disbelief.

He took a slow breath, and his expression grew haunted. "It's a long story," he finally said.

Ella waited for more, but no explanation came. He just stood there, glassy-eyed, lost in some memory. Then he collected himself, turned away, and continued gathering his belongings.

"So that's it?" Ella snapped. "You're just going to walk away after saying something *that* world-shattering? You're not even going to explain why you were hurling wind gusts at the Veil... or *how* you got an audience with the Grand Council?"

"That sounds about right," he said smugly, as he placed his magnifying glass into his satchel. He looked around for the other tools he'd unpacked. There were all kinds of trinkets and whatnots scattered about. His movements were tense, almost hurried, as though every second mattered.

"You can't say something like that and then just leave," scolded Ella.

He rolled his eyes at her. "Look, I came here for proof today. And—because of *you*—that proof was compromised... But, at least now I can tell them that I observed the same phenomenon twice." He paused, eyes becoming dazed as his thoughts retreated inward. "They'll have to listen this time." He said it to himself, but Ella's ears were sharp, so it was as if he'd said it to her.

"They *who*? What are you mumbling about?" she demanded.

The boy snapped. "I don't know who you are—but the last time I checked, I didn't have to explain myself to some nosy schoolgirl who shouldn't even be out here." He huffed. As far as he was concerned, Alvania was unsafe. No one should be out here—not even him.

Immediately, Ella's shoulders tensed, a stubborn spark flaring in her eyes. "For your information—my name is Ella. And I live here!"

The Fara boy paused in disbelief. “Not possible. There are no Fara in Alvaria anymore,” he countered.

“But we are! We’re here—” she said, defiant.

“We *who*?” he challenged. After all, she had to be joking.

But Ella’s face was serious. “Me, my momma, and my papa,” she rebutted, refusing to yield.

The young wind-fara let out a skeptical huff. “But...it’s dangerous. Even before The Veil was cast, this place was cursed. The trees are angry, the winds are unpredictable—not to mention the Trolls! That’s why the Fara left here centuries ago.”

“Well... I’ve been here my whole life and I’ve never met an angry tree,” Ella said, folding her arms. “And, for the record, your information about Trolls is grossly outdated.”

The strange boy wrinkled his brow. *What in the world is this wild Fara girl talking about?* He didn’t say it with his mouth, but his face shouted it.

And Ella heard it.

“*You said* that there were *Trolls* in Alvaria,” she clarified. “That’s not true. All of the Trolls petrified threecenturies ago. My grandpoppa saw it with his own eyes.”

“Two centuries?” questioned the boy. “That would make him over three hundred years old. No Fara lives *that* long,” he scoffed.

And he was right. After all, the average Fara life expectancy was only about a hundred years—give or take a little.

“Grandpoppa isn’t a fara. He’s a Gnome. And he’s three hundred and *seventeen* years, to be exact—which is actually quite middle-aged for Gnomes.”

“*Gnome*? Wait, so are you—?”

“No,” Ella interrupted, already knowing where he was going. It was the question everyone asked her. “No, I am not part Gnome,” she clarified. Then with a playful huff she said, “My dad was adopted.”

“A Fara adopted by a Gnome—I didn’t even know that was allowed.” The boy’s expression twisted slightly, as if trying to piece together a puzzle that didn’t quite fit. “So, your family really lives out here all alone?” He exhaled, shaking his head. “That’s... strange.”

And perhaps it was, because Fara never lived outside of the sanctioned Fara realms. It just wasn’t done.

Ella chuckled. “*Alone*? How can we be alone with so many creatures around?” She gestured around them. “There are the Piddles, the Pods, and the Gnoms, of course. There are even a few Thistlegrin that still move through the trees—if you look hard enough. None of them are Fara, sure, but that doesn’t make them any less our forest family.”

The boy’s shoulders relaxed ever so slightly as Ella spoke of the people in Alvaria. He’d never seen a Thistlegrin before. He wondered if they truly looked like the drawings in his schoolbooks. For a moment, he listened as her words painted pictures of community and a forest of wonder—not the terror he’d been taught to believe it was. But then his gaze slid back to the Veil. Its presence loomed over him like a bad memory. “I have to go,” he said abruptly, turning on his heel.

Ella blinked, thrown by the sudden shift. “Wait—what?” she blurted, but he was already walking away.

Instinct took over, and Ella hurried after him, trying to keep up as he strode ahead. “Hey—I wasn’t done talking,” she scolded.

“You’ve been talking for ten minutes straight. What else could you possibly have left to say?” the boy replied smugly. Then he walked forward, periodically raising a hand to feel the air, as though searching for some unseen current. Perhaps a road away from Alvaria—a road away from her.

“Well...” she hesitated. “I just wanted to say that...” She thought for a moment more. Then—“Oh!” She had it. “I am *not* a nosy schoolgirl!”

“Huh?” he said, confused.

“A few minutes ago, you called me a nosy schoolgirl.”

“I *did*?” He frowned, then thought for a second. “I did,” he admitted, though he didn’t apologize.

“Well, I’m not—nosy, I mean. I’m not a schoolgirl either. Not yet, anyway. I start this fall, though.” She attempted to sound casual, but anyone could see how hard she was trying. Ella quickened her steps trying to keep up with him. “What about you?” she asked.

“What *about* me?” he replied, with a huff.

“Well, did you start school yet? At the Great Oak, I mean?” she asked enthusiastically.

“I know what you mean,” he said, deadpan as he continued to feel for wind currents. But Ella was persistent.

“Okay, well, *did* you?” she asked again.

“If I tell you, will you leave me alone?”

“Hey—you’re in *my* forest. If *anyone* is going to set conditions here, it should be me,” she said matter-of-factly.

Tamerik—who had been listening to the entire discourse in the distance, tilted his head in surprise, his ears perking up. For her first time with another Fara—other than her parents, of course—Ella was doing better than expected.

But this was no dimwitted youngling.

The boy suddenly stopped and turned toward Ella with a sudden smirk, “You know, I should probably warn the other students at the Great Oak to practice their bowing so that they have it right for the start of the school year.”

That's an odd change of subject, Ella thought. But he was a strange boy—so she decided to play along, playing right into the punchline.

“Why in Everlast would you do that? The King and Queen don’t actually awake until the *end* of the year?” she said with confidence.

“I know. But, it’s not the King and Queen they’ll be practicing for... It’s the nosey *Alvarian princess* they need to prepare for.”

Ella gasped in offense. She fell right into his trap. “*Nosey!* Well, that’s extremely... extremely—”

“Extremely *true!*” he quipped.

“No. Extremely rude!” Ella snapped back.

“Well,” he said, his smirk turning into a grin, “you were extremely *nosey*, so...”

“Well, I would rather be nosey than rotten,” blurted Ella.

Emery let out a sharp, frustrated sigh as he attempted to walk away again. He was annoyed. She annoyed him. Not in the worst way—in that bitter way of enemies. No, this was more like the nagging voice of his mother calling him to supper, or how he felt when his father asked him to recheck his equations before even looking at them, or—

“Hey!” she interrupted his thoughts. “I’m talking to you. Where are you going?”

And suddenly, it clicked.

Kinsey. His sister. Ella seemed to possess the same annoying charm of his sister. It had been over a year since he last saw her. How he missed her, and Ella had managed to capture her likeness. So, he—much to his own surprise—softened his stance toward her—just a bit.

He stopped to finally face her, now hovering above Ella with the strong, powerful gusts of his wind.

“You know, for a flightless Fara without magic, you sure have some nerve,” he said with eyebrows deviously arched.

Ella's heart sank. He knew. Was it that obvious? Was that all he saw of her—a Fara without magic? Was that all anyone would see of her at the Great Oak when she arrived that autumn?

She took a deep breath, her chest tightening with the weight of his words. But before she could spiral into doubt, the boy's lips curled into a faint, amused grin.

"Some nerve," he repeated. "Annoying, nosy, clumsy, chatty..." He paused, his piercing gaze softening slightly. "But you're as brave as a timberwolf."

A full smile broke through his devious expression before he turned, giving her and Tamerik one last glance. Then, with the ease of a breeze, he wisped away into the winds of Everlast.

"Wait!" Ella shouted out to him as he became a dot in the distance. "You never told me..." Suddenly the current became stronger and pushed the boy away. "...your name," she whispered to herself.

And just like that, he was gone.

Ella lingered, staring at the horizon, her mind swirling. Would she ever see him again?

"Maybe—" she murmured, her lips curving into a faint smile. "Maybe we might even become friends."

Ella turned back to the Veil. Its ominous shadow seemed to stretch toward her, filling her with unease.

"What was that dark, malevolent hand, Tamerik?" she asked quietly. "Where did it come from?"

Tamerik's pale blue eyes stayed fixed on the Veil as he replied, his voice low and steady, "Not from anywhere good—that's for sure."

Ella swallowed hard, her chest tightening.

“Breathe, Ella,” he said, glancing at her. “Fear gives it more power than it deserves. There are many shadows in this world, but the light is always greater still. You’ll see—it will all come out right in the end.”

“How can you be sure?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Because I have faith, young pup. And it is what you must also learn to have,” he replied as he nuzzled his nose into her chest.

Ella smiled as her heart settled. Tamerik’s words were the perfect medicine for the moment. “Thank you, Tamerik,” she whispered.

The large beast sat back, satisfaction flickering across his face before he tucked it away.

“Well... one does what one must.” He cleared his throat. “Now, might this faithfilled maiden be ready to resume our forest adventure?”

“All right, all right,” Ella relented, climbing onto his back. “You’ve waited long enough.” She leaned low, her knees tightening against his sides. “To the path!” she shouted.

Like lightning, Tamerik shot forward, his claws gripping the earth as he tore down the trail. He wove through roots and foliage with effortless grace, his powerful strides commanding the forest’s attention.

Ella held tight, her hair whipping in the wind, her heart pounding with the thrill of it all. Her questions about the boy and the shadowy hand would have to wait until the chase was done. For now, the warmth of Tamerik’s presence and the thrill of the hunt was all that mattered. They were one with the forest, and she was the heartbeat of their adventure.