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ALSO BY TIFFANY TSAO

The Oddfits

**THE MORE
KNOWN
WORLD**

THE ODDFITS SERIES

**TIFFANY
TSAO**

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*In memory of Ron Cauble (1940–2014),
who was passionately odd and encouraged oddness in
others*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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CHAPTER 10

Garamond was right. The mosquitoes at the lake really were enormous: broad backed and burly, with bulging femurs and thick bushy palps. Each one was the size of a soccer ball and had a proboscis as thick as a sewing needle. The sight of them droning low and slow across the surface of the dark red waters made Murgatroyd shift uneasily from foot to foot, especially when he recalled that he had neglected to buy a new jar of Tally Ho Miracle Cream.

“Do they bite?” he asked nervously.

Ann shrugged. “This is all new to me.”

By *this*, Ann meant everything around them: the lake on whose rocky shores they stood, so vast that they only had Garamond’s word to go on to prevent them from thinking it might be an ocean; the dense forest of vine-covered trees they had trekked through to reach this spot; the gigantic mosquitoes and the turtlelike creature gliding beneath the lake’s surface, propelled by the powerful strokes of its six flippers and four transparent dorsal fins.

“And we thought the entry for Cambodia-Abscond was finally finished.” Ann chuckled softly. “Wait till Christian finds out.”

“S-Say again?” stammered Murgatroyd, distracted by a mosquito moving menacingly towards them. It appeared to be doing the aerial equivalent of a swagger.

“Getting the Compendium cards in shape for this Territory has always been an uphill battle. It was only last year that Christian in cataloguing made it his pet project to compile all the ambient information floating around about Cambodia-Abscond that no one had ever bothered to write down.”

To Murgatroyd’s relief, the mosquito did an about-face and began swaggering away. “Why hadn’t anyone bothered?”

Ann shrugged a second time. “No one got around to it, I guess. And it’s not like Fleetowners encourage the documentation of their Territory. Anyway, Christian was pleased as punch about finally having complete data on Cambodia-Abscond, and now, look.” She gestured at the lake with a sweeping motion of her hand.

“Should we take notes, then?” asked Murgatroyd.

“Maybe later.”

Ann seated herself cross-legged on the stones beneath them and gazed at the horizon.

It became apparent after a while that Ann intended to stay in this position and not say anything for some time.

“Erh, should we start looking for clues?” asked Murgatroyd.

Ann merely gave an abstracted grunt, and he was left with little choice but to follow her example.

Thankfully the mosquitoes seemed wholly uninterested in him and Ann. Feeling more at ease, he let his mind drift back to his first encounter with the animal life of the More Known World: Ivan Ho’s pet mosquitoes, which he had been tasked with feeding from his own arm. They had looked pretty much identical to the mosquitoes of the Known World, the ones in Singapore at least. But he remembered the strange bond he’d developed with Ivan’s pets as they had fed, the loving and trusting way they had sunk their mouthparts into his flesh,

like children burying their faces in a parent's shoulder or chest. There had, of course, been the intense itching afterwards, but thanks to Ivan's miraculous lotion, it had been short lived, leaving nothing in its wake but warmth and affection for the little creatures.

He hadn't suspected back then how many more mosquito-based life forms he would go on to encounter during his travels through the More Known World: mosquitoes identical in appearance to ones in the Known World, like Ivan's pets, but also ones florescent and ones phosphorescent, ones translucent and ones tumescent. Mosquitoes so tiny and transparent they looked like darting specks of dust, and mosquitoes like the ones around him, beefy and stout—not to mention the numerous animals that had diverged considerably from their ancestral mosquito form: the moskotter of Canada-Samba, for example, whose wings had evolved into veined, webbed paws that propelled it supine through the water as its compound-eyed antennae kept watch for plump half-shelled quito-qlams nestled in the riverbeds. Or the choss pashe of Persia-Aperture, which fogged anything it regarded as a potential mate in a pheromone-heavy gas that smelled of old cheese, decaying pine needles, and squid excrement. Or the Whirling Badass Helicopter of Doom of Antarctica-Blitz—named, obviously, by the Other—which was carnivorous, belligerent, and fed primarily on the hapless rat-sized Fodder of the Whirling Badass Helicopter of Doom, whose title also bore all the hallmarks of the Other's naming style.

Suddenly these ruminations made Murgatroyd dizzy and out of breath. He leaned forward and pressed his face into his hands. It overwhelmed him to think about it, the vastness of the Worlds and the infinite variety and number of beings, animate and inanimate, mosquito related and otherwise, that populated them. Even if there were a thousand Quests, each powered by a thousand individuals, it would never be enough. *There is too much*, he thought in awe.

"There is too much."

To his surprise, it wasn't he who said this, but Ann. The reason she had gone quiet all of a sudden was because, moments earlier, she too had been visited by the same sense of mystery and wonder—how unfathomable it all was, the height and depth and breadth of the universe and everything in it. The feeling certainly wasn't new, but even though it came upon her often enough to be a familiar sensation, it came infrequently enough for her to be startled afresh each time.

Ann did not usually yield so conspicuously to these moments. Certainly she'd experienced them alongside Murgatroyd in the past without needing to sit down and flap her gums about it. But the dreams had paid visits several nights in a row, leaving her more exhausted than even she knew. Before she realized it, she found herself not only saying that there was too much, but uttering the words that came to mind whenever she felt this way—words that gave partial expression to a second feeling, which always welled up in the wake of that first swell of awe, and which could best be described as a deep yearning for an explanation. Not a reason, mind you, or a solution, or a one-word answer or a several-word answer, or even a several-paragraph answer, but an intricate and elaborate explanation as boundless and infinite as the universe itself apparently was—no, more infinite still.

And the words tumbling from her lips were a fragmented gesture straining to catch a glimpse of this explanation, to part the cosmic curtain: "Something that can't be found by covering more ground."

Murgatroyd had recovered enough from his amazement at the first sentence Ann had uttered to greet this next batch of words with an unfiltered, unabashed "Hah?"

"It's what Yusuf said to me once," said Ann seamlessly, concealing her own astonishment from Murgatroyd and even from herself without skipping a beat. One of the many tricks she'd learned well as a child.

"When?" asked Murgatroyd.

"When he was teaching me something."

Murgatroyd's eyes widened. "I thought he retired before you joined the Quest."

"He did."

Murgatroyd sighed, reminding Ann of what he had said back in Flee Town about conversation being important to people like him.

"He still came back every now and then," she added. "When absolutely necessary. It wasn't a complete break. And obviously, he told us about you. Sometimes he had information we needed. And he was always better at teaching new recruits when it came to certain skills."

"Why didn't you say anything about this before?" sputtered Murgatroyd.

Ann was genuinely surprised. "It never came up."

"Yes, but . . . you know Uncle Yusuf was important to me. Is *still* important to me. How can you not—" Murgatroyd could see from Ann's face that she had absolutely no clue why he was upset. "Never mind. It's fine. Just tell me now."

"Tell you what?"

"What Uncle Yusuf said!"

There was a long silence. At first, Murgatroyd was worried Ann was angry, but just as he was about to apologize for his outburst, she replied. Her voice was distant, as if to retrieve the answer, she had travelled very far away.

"The One was having trouble teaching me a particular skill, so she asked Yusuf to help. At the end of our last session, I asked him why he retired. And he said it was because he wanted to concentrate on something else. He said it was 'something that can't be found by covering more ground.'"

Murgatroyd felt a fresh gust of wonder sweep through him and puff out the sails of his heart. "What did he mean?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't think he did either."

Just as Murgatroyd was about to say something else, Ann sensed his desire to ask more questions and decided to change the subject. Enough

was enough. "Mud. That's why we're here, isn't it?" She pulled the peculiar leather pouch out of her bag, then pulled the peculiar notebook out of the pouch. Murgatroyd looked around.

"There!" he proclaimed, pointing in triumph to a slimy patch among all the stones. He trotted over, as did Ann, but upon attaining the mud puddle he was overcome by a sudden attack of knee wobbles and had to crouch down to stabilize himself. It took a few moments before he realized why. He'd stopped registering Cambodia-Abscond's redness days ago, most likely because it had never bothered him in the same way it had Mildred. But now the sticky, coagulated dark substance before him served as a visceral reminder of what stuff the Territory was made of. As if roused by the recognition of kindred matter, the blood in Murgatroyd's temples began to throb.

Ann extended one of the notebook pages and held it up to the light for comparison.

"Pretty realistic," she said admiringly. "It looks stickier in person, though. And more clotted." She extended a boot towards the mud and poked it with her toe. It squirted a little, which made Murgatroyd's stomach turn. Then she turned to the drawings of the pebbles. "But *these*. They're exactly like the real thing. Here, could you hold this open?"

She handed Murgatroyd the book, and he did his best to oblige, extending the page outwards and holding it up to the sky as Ann had been doing. Ann picked up a pebble, wiped it off on the cuff of her trousers, and held it next to the page for comparison.

"Would you look at that," she said, taking a deep breath.

Murgatroyd did. It was as if he were truly seeing for the first time.

He saw that it wasn't about which was the real pebble and which were representations, nor was it about how faithful the sketches were to, as Ann had put it, "the real thing." Side by side, the pebble and drawings seemed to illuminate and augment each other, tuning up the frequency of each other's essential nature so that all the pebbles, of stone and on

page, sang out their pebblehood in unison, in a voice sharp and clear and in a pitch high and sweet, for the whole world to hear.

“Wow,” Ann said at last.

“Walau,” seconded Murgatroyd.

Then: an intense and ear-splitting silence.

As Murgatroyd crumpled to the ground, he saw Ann sinking as well, her expression startled at first, but then slackening. He saw the brief struggle—the widening of her eyes, the tensing of her face into a look of mingled alarm and aggression. Another wave of silence crashed around them, and everything about her sagged once more. And he too sagged, onto the stones, into the mud.

Before blacking out completely, he heard a noise penetrate the silence. No, a voice—raspy and low. “My notebook,” it said. Then silence flooded in once more.

Murgatroyd was eased awake by a gentle pitching motion, back and forth. He heard two voices—or rather, two nonvoices: one gravelly and low, and one wispy and high. They were speaking a language similar to the Nothing the Flee Town youth used among themselves, and yet it was entirely different. More effortless and fluid. So fluid he might not even have registered the nonvoices’ presence if it hadn’t been for the fact that his head was covered in some sort of bag, which made his hearing especially acute. All around him, he heard a sloshing sound, and every now and then a light drizzle would fall to his left or his right, sprinkling him with something he hoped was innocuous, like water. If he had to guess, he would say he was in a boat—or more precisely, attached to a boat, for he could not budge from the narrow bench on which he was sitting no matter how hard he tried. Upon attempting to use his arms to provide leverage, he discovered they were pinioned firmly to his sides. He tried frantically to free them, flailing his torso around in the process,

but the boat gave a sudden lurch and he felt something flat and hard smack him on the thigh.

“Ow!” he yelped.

The low, gravelly nonvoice communicated a silence that was tangibly a threat.

Murgatroyd began to panic. Who were these people? And where was Ann? Swallowing his terror, he managed to squeak, “Hello, Ann? Are you there?”

To his relief, Ann answered from behind him. “I’m fine. Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes,” Murgatroyd sputtered, almost happy. “What’s going on?”

“We’re being taken somewhere.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know,” replied Ann. “I’m tied up and I can’t see.”

“Me too. Maybe we can ask?”

But before Ann could weigh in on this proposed course of action, Murgatroyd had timidly begun addressing their captors. “Erh, hello? Hello? Where are you taking us?”

His question was met with silence from the high, wispy voice—but he couldn’t understand what it meant.

“Come again?” he asked.

The same answer.

“Ah,” said Murgatroyd, not knowing what else to say.

He heard Ann sigh.

“Did you understand?” Murgatroyd whispered.

“No, why would I?”

“Because you understand lots of things.”

“Not this one. We’ll have to wait and see what they have in store for us.”

“Oh,” replied Murgatroyd. A grave concern popped into his head.

“Do you think it’s bad?”

“Do I think what’s bad?”

"Erh, what they have in store for us."

"Don't know."

"Oh," said Murgatroyd gloomily, followed a few seconds later by, "I hope it's not," and three seconds after that, "Could we ask?"

Ann sighed again. "What makes you think we'll understand the answer this time?"

But Murgatroyd had made up his mind. "Hello? Sir? Or Miss? What are you going to do with us?"

The two silences seemed to confer. And to Ann and Murgatroyd's surprise, they heard someone clear a throat and begin to speak haltingly. It seemed to belong to the owner of the high, wispy silence, and it sounded as if the voice was trying its best to be menacing, with the result that it came out like a bark.

"We—are—going—" It paused, as if it were tired.

"We figured that much," grumbled Ann under her breath.

The voice started again: "We—are—going—to—"

"Yes?" asked Murgatroyd, dying of suspense. "Where? Where are we going?"

The voice cleared its throat again, then hawked and made a spitting sound. It started again.

"We—are—going—to—"

"You said that already!" Murgatroyd cried.

"Murgatroyd, calm down!" exclaimed Ann. "Let it finish!"

There was another pause—an irritated one.

"I'm sorry," Murgatroyd squeaked. "I won't interrupt again. Please, where are we going?"

"We—" the voice started again, testily.

"We—" it repeated, as if taking several steps back to get a running start.

"We—are—going—to—eat—you."

At this unwelcome piece of news, Murgatroyd blacked out once more.

Murgatroyd awoke to find that he had not yet been eaten. In fact, to his immense relief, it appeared that not even a tiny part of him had been consumed. He counted his toes. Ten. He counted his fingers. Nine. He gasped and recounted them. Ten. Phew. He grasped at his ears. Two. He pinched his nose. One. He looked down at his body and found not so much as a scratch, though in the course of patting himself all over he did discover a very enormous, very tender lump on the crown of his head.

He also realized that he could see, which meant that the bag had been removed from his head. And he realized that since he was able to grasp and pinch and pat himself, he wasn't tied up anymore.

Then, to his horror, he realized that Ann was nowhere in sight.

He called out her name. There was no response.

The room in which he was imprisoned was clean, dry, and circular—and very spacious. The walls and floor were made of a pink claylike material covered with tiny scalloped indentations, and if Murgatroyd had been of a mind to inspect these surfaces more closely, he would have seen that the indentations were whorled and had been made by a very careful, artistic thumb. The walls curved inward as they rose from the ground, forming a dome overhead, but stopping just short of completion so that there was a large round portal in the ceiling's centre, allowing sunlight to stream in from above.

Murgatroyd's first thought was that he might be able to climb out through the opening, but as he squinted, he saw it was, in fact, covered with an iridescent veined material like the pages of the notebook he and Ann had been looking at immediately before their capture. Cutting or punching through it was the next idea that crossed his mind, but he then became aware of the absence of any apparatus that would help him reach it. The furnishings were spare, especially compared to the heavily pillowed interiors of the Bovquito Arms back in Flee Town. There was a very low wooden table, curved like the wall and pressed flush against

it. There was a fuzzy grey rug upon which he had regained consciousness. But that was all.

Murgatroyd tried calling out again. “Ann! Can you hear me?” Still no response. “Hello? Anyone? The woman I was with! Where is she? Do you know?”

To his astonishment, someone came through the wall. She was dressed in a loose ankle-length garment, its rich pomegranate colour fading gradually into a deep orchid purple as the garment flowed from her shoulders to her toes. *They’re real*, thought Murgatroyd, recalling the ghostly cannibals the children had told him about. *The savages are real.*

He was too worried about Ann to shrink away. “My friend,” he demanded. “Where is she?”

Before the woman could respond, his eyes fell on the earthenware bowl in her hands, which was filled with a red meaty stew. He turned even paler than usual.

“My f-friend . . . ,” he stammered, before his voice gave way. He raised a trembling finger and pointed at the bowl. “Eaten?” he asked at last, unable to manage anything else.

The woman regarded the bowl’s contents thoughtfully, then looked at him again before making a funny snorting sound with her nose. “Yes,” she said.

Murgatroyd fainted for a third time.

When Murgatroyd came around, he was staring at the pale-pink sky. And juxtaposed against that sky was Ann’s head.

Murgatroyd screamed.

“Oh, pull yourself together,” said the head, which he then saw was attached to a body.

Murgatroyd sprang to his feet and threw his arms around her neck. “Ann! You’re alive!”

“Of course, I am!” she said, allowing herself to be hugged. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“She said you were eaten!” Murgatroyd whirled around and saw the woman standing behind them.

She snorted in the same way she had before. “Sorry,” she apologized in a low, gravelly voice. “I thought you were asking if she had eaten.”

“*We are going to eat you!*” someone yelled.

Murgatroyd screamed in fright yet again and spun around to find a curly-headed teenager—maybe around fifteen or sixteen—doubled over in silent laughter.

The woman communicated something to him in a stern, wordless voice, and the youth shot back a soundless reply, rolled his eyes, and walked away. From the sound of their voices—or rather, lack of voices—Murgatroyd realized that they were the two people who had captured him and Ann.

The woman turned to them and snorted for the third time. Murgatroyd realized that she did this every time she was about to speak. “That’s just what we say to scare people. It’s a protection tactic.”

“It’s horrible!” wailed Murgatroyd.

The woman beamed. “Yes, it is, isn’t it! You should tell Benn. He’ll be so pleased. He came up with it. Stew?” She pressed a bowl of it into his hands, along with a wooden spoon.

Murgatroyd wanted to ask who Benn was, but it occurred to him then that there were many other questions swimming around in his head and perhaps he should ask one of them instead. Under the circumstances, it was difficult for him to decide which one to utter first: “Who’s Benn?” or “Who are you people?”; “What are you people?” or “Where are we?”; “What are you going to do with us?” or “What’s in the stew?”

“Chicken,” said the woman, eliminating the last question.

“They call bovquitos chickens,” Ann clarified. “You should have some. It’s very good.” She returned to the low wooden stool where she’d

been sitting before the woman had dragged Murgatroyd out of the house. As if in further endorsement, she picked up her bowl from the ground and exhibited how clean she'd scraped it.

Murgatroyd lowered himself onto the stool next to her, and as he began to eat, he took in his surroundings. He and Ann were seated in the shadow of a pink domed structure—the same place, he guessed, he had been trying to escape from when the woman had walked in. A cloth of the same hue as the structure hung across the entrance, which explained why he'd thought that the woman had entered, ghostlike, through the wall. A few paces to their left was a low wooden table like the one Murgatroyd had seen inside the room. On top of it were two heavy-looking maroon pots, one containing the stew that the woman was now ladling out for herself, and one with its lid still on.

Surrounding the clearing where they sat were bloodwood trees—much larger than any he had seen in Cambodia-Abscond so far. And between their enormous trunks, he could glimpse other domes of differing sizes, but all of the same sky-pink hue. Small fenced patches of vegetation were scattered here and there—gardens, he guessed, because he could see people plucking and pruning and uprooting things. And beyond, in the background, he espied a field, populated with grazing bovquitos.

He heard Ann cough—the kind of cough meant to get someone's attention—and he reined in his gaze. To his right stood the woman with her hand extended, waiting for Murgatroyd to shake it.

"My name is Nutmeg," she said.

"Sorry," Murgatroyd apologized, taking the hand. "My name is Murgatroyd."

"Pleasure to meet you," she declared too quickly, as if the ritual didn't quite come naturally to her.

"Nutmeg," Murgatroyd repeated. "Erh. Like the spice?"

Her face brightened. "You know it!" she exclaimed.

He did. Or rather, he thought he did. At the restaurant where he had used to work, his boss, Shakti, had made him taste a lot of foods in an attempt to "refine his palate." He'd had to spend an entire day consuming nothing but spoonfuls of herbs and spices. The session had ended in severe stomach cramps.

Yet the expression on Nutmeg's face had brightened so much at the news of Murgatroyd's familiarity with her namesake that he felt he should say something more. "It tasted like spice!" he added.

Nutmeg beamed. "Exactly!"

"Why were you named Nutmeg?" he asked.

"Technically speaking, I wasn't. My name is actually ____." And here she emitted a short but unpronounceable silence. "It's *nutmeg* translated into my language, but it means the same thing."

"But nutmeg only grows in the Known World, doesn't it?" he asked.

"True," said Nutmeg, not quite grasping the reason for Murgatroyd's puzzlement, "but my mother said by the time I had reached my naming day, I looked like a nutmeg: brown and round."

Forgetting his curiosity about how Nutmeg came to be named after a Known World plant, Murgatroyd guffawed. "You are!" he blurted, before clapping his hands over his mouth and turning red. "Erh, I mean . . ." he began. But he trailed off when it became apparent that, one, he had in fact meant it, and two, that Nutmeg, far from looking offended, was blinking, waiting for him to finish his sentence.

"Please, go on. What do you mean?"

"Erh. Nothing. Sorry, leh. I mean, I'm sorry I said that."

"Why?"

"Dunno," he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck, flustered. "I always say the wrong thing and make people mad . . ."

Nutmeg looked intensely puzzled. "It's okay. I *am* still brown and round. Why would I be mad? That would be like you getting mad if I said you were pale and skinny with a big nose and yellow hair."

“Yes, it would,” said Murgatroyd with a nervous laugh, still unable to believe he hadn’t offended her.

Nutmeg was positively tickled now, giving off raspy silent hoots, which Murgatroyd assumed were some form of laughter.

“Or,” she continued, “if you got mad just because someone said your posture is terrible and your mouth hangs open.”

“Yes,” exclaimed Murgatroyd, being coaxed into the spirit of things. “Or if you got mad at me for saying that you have very bushy eyebrows.”

Nutmeg beamed. “Do you really think so?”

“Yes,” Murgatroyd affirmed. “They’re almost like one big eyebrow. I wish mine were like that. Also, why do you do that thing with your nose every time you want to say something?”

“Oh, that. It makes it easier to make sounds, that’s all. I don’t know how you two manage to say anything *without* doing it.”

Ann, who was observing all this, couldn’t help but smile. “Murgatroyd,” she said, “Before you woke up, Nutmeg was saying that the notebook belongs to her.”

“Yes,” said Nutmeg. “So happy you found it. Sorry we startled you.”

“Think nothing of it,” said Ann pleasantly.

Pleasantly, Murgatroyd looked at her in surprise. Ann paid him no notice.

“And sorry we had to knock you out and bring you here. It was the safest course of action to take.”

“Perfectly understandable,” said Ann in that same unnaturally amiable tone. She followed this remark with an equally unnatural reassuring smile.

Murgatroyd tried his best to play along. “Erh, yes. Perfectly,” he echoed. “And I’m sure the swelling from whatever you used to hit us will go down quickly,” he added, touching the crown of his head.

Nutmeg frowned. “We used a battle cry to knock you out, not a weapon.”

Murgatroyd too frowned. “Then where did this come from?” he said, pointing to his lump.

Nutmeg squinted. “Oh, that’s a bite. From the birds on the lake. They don’t usually attack humans, but when they do, it’s pretty painful.”

Murgatroyd recalled what Garamond had said about the lake not being a popular destination. He sighed.

“We saw you found my notebook,” continued Nutmeg, “and were obviously using it to try and find us. We couldn’t risk you discovering how to get here yourselves, so we took matters into our own hands.”

“That makes sense,” said Ann with a nod. Murgatroyd commenced nodding as well.

“No one else saw the notebook, did they?” Nutmeg asked.

“No,” said Ann evenly and without hesitation. Upon hearing the lie, Murgatroyd felt it all come flooding back—Nimali’s slit throat, the two other murders, the fact that he and Ann had in fact been kidnapped. His tongue went dry, and he could feel himself breaking into a cold sweat.

“Oh good,” Nutmeg sighed. “It’s my fault, really. Benn will be so upset. What a mess I’ve caused.”

“It’s all right,” said Ann. And suddenly, Murgatroyd thought, *A cat*. That’s what Ann’s tone reminded him of. *A very careful cat*.

Deftly Ann picked up that name and returned it as if it were a dropped handkerchief. This was the second time Nutmeg had mentioned it. “Why will Benn be upset?”

“People can’t find out about us. It’s for our own safety. We’ve kept ourselves hidden all this time.”

“Ah.” Ann nodded.

Nutmeg pursed her lips. “I should have been more careful. But you see”—she turned to Murgatroyd now and looked at him with an earnest, clear gaze—“it fell out of my pocket when I was bending over her—the woman.”

Murgatroyd’s blood froze.

There was the briefest of pauses before Ann responded. "I can see how that would happen."

"I wanted to make sure she was dead," Nutmeg continued.

Ann nodded. Murgatroyd's heart raced.

"Awful," she sighed. "Whoever killed her was cruel. The Worlds really are a dangerous place."

Murgatroyd almost collapsed with relief. Ann looked noticeably relieved as well, though she attempted to keep her expression unchanged.

"They are," Ann agreed. "So, she was dead when you found her?"

Nutmeg nodded. "There was nothing I could do to help her. And I knew someone would find her before too long. I knew the chickens would drain her when they came across her body, but that couldn't be helped."

"Couldn't be helped," Ann echoed.

Murgatroyd could contain himself no longer. "You didn't kill her!" he exclaimed.

Ann turned her eye on him sharply.

Nutmeg frowned. "Of course not!" Her expression changed to one of horror. "Is *that* what you thought?"

"Sorry," he said. "It's just that there are stories we heard in Flee Town about savages who . . ." Murgatroyd trailed off when he realized that Ann was glaring at him.

Nutmeg was alarmed. "There are stories about us? They think we kill people? How much do they know?"

"Nothing," Ann said smoothly. "Nothing at all. They're just rumours. And they're all completely wrong."

Nutmeg looked suspicious. "Are they?"

"Yes," Murgatroyd affirmed hastily. "Completely. They call you savages and think that you're ghosts who eat people and go back and forth between Territories. But only a few people think this. And nobody else believes them."

Nutmeg's expression grew troubled anyway. "Benn is *really* going to be upset." The lines in her brow deepened. "And why do they think we all can go back and forth between Territories? Only one of us can do that."

Ann didn't respond immediately, but when she did, her tone was all nonchalance. "Absurd, isn't it?" she remarked breezily. Then almost as an afterthought: "When you say 'only one of us,' you mean . . ."

"Only one of us," affirmed Nutmeg.

"You?" Ann asked.

"Oh no," Nutmeg said hastily. "I mean, I wish I could. How fantastic would that be! Imagine!"

"Yes, imagine," agreed Ann, though she didn't have to at all. "How long have you been here?" she asked lightly.

"My whole life."

"I mean all of you. This whole . . ." Ann searched for the right word. ". . . Community. How long have all of you lived here?"

"Oh, ages," answered Nutmeg.

"How many years?"

Nutmeg laughed. "Too many to count. Ever so long. Before my great-great-grandparents' time. Before my great-great-great-grandparents' time."

"Amazing!" Murgatroyd exclaimed. "But how do you know English?"

"Benn taught me. It's his native language."

"And how did you get here?" Murgatroyd continued.

"Maybe you should ask Benn," said Nutmeg, looking wary all of a sudden. "I'm not sure how much I should be telling you. I'll take you to him after this. In the meantime, dessert?" She lifted the lid of the other pot and began ladling a thick soup into two bowls. It was the texture and colour of boiled clay.

Murgatroyd thought about how to decline as politely as possible. "I should finish this first," he said, pointing to the stew he'd been neglecting.

Tiffany Tsao

“You can eat it later,” said Nutmeg, holding the bowls out to them. “You should taste *this* now. I think you’ll like it. It’s our specialty.”

Ann accepted the bowl, and reluctantly, Murgatroyd did the same. They raised the unappetizing-looking concoction to their lips. Each took a tentative sip.

For a split-second, time stopped. For a split-second, the world stopped. For a split-second, their hearts cracked open and out bubbled streams of fresh joy.

“How can?” Murgatroyd murmured.

“Can’t be,” Ann murmured at the same time.

But it was. Beyond a doubt. Yusuf’s ice cream.

“It’s one of my favourite flavours,” said Nutmeg. “Elation.”

CHAPTER 11

Despite Cambodia-Abscond being one of the first Territories discovered by the Quest, there were two things about it that remained a mystery: What had caused the Territory to turn from beige to blood red all of a sudden—literally *blood* red? And where had the blood come from?

No one had come up with any truly satisfactory answers to these two questions, but as intriguing as these questions were, far more intriguing were those that went unasked. For example, wasn’t it peculiar that Flee Town’s younger generation had come up with an entirely new nonsound-based language?

Such oversight was understandable. Certain qualities attract more attention than others. An individual with a booming voice will always draw more attention than a soft-spoken one. A man dressed in a neon-yellow moose costume inevitably overshadows the woman next to him in an understated grey dress, however elegant the dress’s cut. In the same way, it was perfectly natural to mistake the colour of Cambodia-Abscond—its bloodiness, and before that, its beigeness—for its defining attribute. The irony was this: the preoccupation with the Territory’s hue actively prevented those who sought to discover more about Cambodia-Abscond from perceiving what really set it apart. One might even have been tempted to think that the Territory was deliberately using colour