

THE STARBURST JUJU

“Sure.” I grabbed my backpack and headed for the kitchen door.

“Don’t forget this!” Dad grinned widely and held up something pink, wiggling it at me.

Oh, right. The phone. I walked back to take it from his outstretched hand, and my fingers froze inches from his. There was a noise—what that awful noise?

Before I could answer, a sound came from our house began. A train was going to through the walls any moment. I looked at my parents. Their eyes were wide as they stared back. The plate lurched from the table and smashed into the floor, shattering orange. Glass dishes and plates danced on the floor a moment before tumbling to the ground, thousands of pieces. I screamed and held my ears. The pounding became unbearable.

Mom was the first to grab me while Dad wrapped his body around us, shielding us from all the flying glass. He winced as shards dug into his legs and back. The thundering strengthened, the vibrations louder and louder in my head. Just when I thought our house might actually collapse, the intense rattling stopped.

“What was that?” I gasped. Dad fell away from us, and I looked down, lightheaded with panic, to where he held his leg. A large fragment of glass had wedged itself into his calf. He took a towel from the table, wrapped it around the glass, and bit off a yell as he hastily tore the piece from his flesh. Blood flowed down his pants as he hobbled to the kitchen door and cracked it open. I followed behind Mom, who chased after him. He peeked out the door, then slammed it shut and fastened the lock.

“Is it them?” Mom’s voice shook.

Dad looked stunned. "I can't believe it. They found us."

Mom's trembling hands grabbed mine, and I met her eyes in reflex, hoping for some reassurance. I found none. I'd never seen her so terrified.

"Who found us?" I asked, not sure if I really wanted to know.

Loud howling came from outside, although I wasn't sure I could hear it. The sound was more like metal screaming out as it was being smashed. The hair on my arms rose. The howling rose into the room until it was right outside our kitchen, pounding on our door. Slowly, but deliberately, it moved away. The howling stopped.

It was now eerily quiet.

My heart thudded too loudly in my ears, I whispered, "Dad, what's out there?"

Before Dad could answer, something massive crashed through the door, smashing it to pieces. Fragments of splintered wood flew all around us; the debris blinded me for a second. Agonizing pain exploded in my shoulder when a large chunk of the door struck my arm. Mom and I screamed as we held onto each other. My arm throbbed in agony.

Two huge Maddocks stomped in; their scent, like wet dog, was suffocating. I'd seen them a million times on TV, but nothing could have prepared me for the real thing. With bodies more like bears, their large snouts curled and bared gleaming canine teeth. The hairy creatures stood upright like humans, so they towered over us. Muscles bulged under their dark fur. Their eyes were large, green and glowing. They moved in a mechanical way, like programmed robots. One of them grabbed Dad

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while the other tore my screaming mother from my grasp, dragging them both out the broken door.

“Pepper! Run!” Dad shouted.

My heart pounding, I frantically looked around the kitchen. With my good arm, I grabbed the first thing I saw, the toaster, and yanked it out of the socket. I cried out in pain as blisters sprouted on my hand before I could even drop it. It was still on heating the waffle. I blinked back tears and pulled out one of our large knives out of a drawer. My burnt hand refused my grip on it, but I pushed through and threw it at the closest Maddock. The back of the creature pumped its arm and fell lamely to the floor. The crawling creature didn't even notice.

“Pepper, please run!”

I ignored the pleas and snatched another knife, only to realize when I reached for it was only a tiny paring blade. I would have to do with what I had. I struck it at the same Maddock, and a shriek of pain came from the beast as the sharp edge sank into its back. A small fraction of a smile slid across my face. I got him.

The alien turned around sharply, noticing me for the first time. It roared furiously, its glowing eyes turning dark.

Oh crap, what was I thinking? I dashed behind the kitchen table in a weak attempt to hide, my stomach lurched as I tried not to throw up. I watched as Dad thrashed around violently to get free, but the Maddock holding him struck him once on the head.

His body went limp and was dragged out the door.

“Dad!” I leapt up from behind the table, feeling faint from the sudden movement. Mom flailed as the other monster tried to yank her outside. She tugged off her

high heel, dug it into the Maddock's hairy arm, wiggled free, and desperately ran to me. We held onto each other for a brief second before the outraged creature wrenched us apart again.

Mom lunged back for me, tears shimmering in her eyes. I grasped her arms, trying to pull her toward me. The Maddock kicked at my feet.

I hunched over the kitchen floor, struggling to breathe. Mom was pulled out the door, she scabbled for a knife from the counter and tossed it to me. I barely caught it.

"Pepper! Jerica! Jerica!" Mom yelled.

"Mom! I...I don't understand!" I could hardly get the words out. Not knowing what to do, I stood on shaky legs, held the pen up, and lunged toward the ugly alien, aiming the sharp end at its glaring eye. I didn't get far before the shaggy Maddock heaved its massive paw out, throwing me across the room. Excruciating pain shot through my head as I collided with the opposite wall.

My body slumped to the ground. Barely able to keep my eyes open, I tried to stand. My vision was hazy, and I fell again. Something wet oozed down my forehead, and when I wiped my hand against the skin, blood stained my palm.

"Stop!" Mom pleaded. With tears running down her cheeks, she was no longer struggling. She seemed almost calm in the alien's arms as she looked into my eyes. "Pepper, tell them to get the star—" The Maddock thumped her on the head. Her eyes rolled back and she no longer moved. Too weak to get up again, I closed my eyes.

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"Pepper! You better not be dead, or I'll kill you! Please, you gotta wake up!"

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It was Parker's voice. It sounded distant and muffled, like I was underwater. I felt him; he was holding my head in his lap, stroking my hair. He gently shook my shoulder.

The shaking. Mom's scream. Dad's unconscious body dragged out the door.

I bolted upright.

"Holy Shibble!" I screamed. Parker scrambled up. He pulled me up and hugged me. I held onto him but pulled back when I noticed my red hands. My clothes, skin, and braids were caked with sticky blood, but I didn't feel anything, really.

"Pepper, I saw them, those ugly buggers. I tried to...but they freaked me across the yard...then they flew off..."

Whether he could hear him anymore, I couldn't tell. They were gone; the Maddocks and my parents. My body and mind collapsed in despair. Parker grabbed me before my head smacked the ground again.

"Whoa—okay. Pepper, lay down. I've already called the police."

The sound of fighter planes droned on overhead. I decided I wasn't moving from the kitchen. I needed to go back to sleep, where I didn't have to think about my parents' motionless bodies. It wasn't until the medics picked me up that I was forced to move as they lifted me onto a stretcher. I heard stifled voices, but I felt miles away. Parker's voice rang through, reassuring me, letting me know he was there, but I wasn't with him. I was gone, slipping away into a deep, horrifyingly dark sleep.

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mention the flashbacks I kept having of those green, glowing eyes, the claws, and Mom's scream. Always Mom's scream. I went through the days numbly, with forced actions for even the smallest movements.

Nana came to stay with me after I was released from the hospital, and it didn't take long for us to become close. She took care of me just like a real grandmother would. In fact, more so than what she really was my grandma. And how could she not, with her name being Nana? Her real name was Nanala, but everyone just called her Nana. She was definitely older like a grandma, but she was young. I always knew that if we ever arm-wrestled, Nana would win in a second.

She was fierce, but she was always working. One minute, she'd be cooking a wonderfully warm and delicious meal; the next she would be carrying a heavy axe out the door to chop thick chunks of wood for the fire that night. She was also the most beautiful grandmother I'd ever seen. She was slender and wore modern clothing that made her look fresh and polished. I had chalked it up to her years of experience in the fashion industry.

But she started doing odd things as soon as she moved in with me, like throwing salt outside the doors every night, boarding up the door of the barn behind our house, and mumbling strange words that I'd never heard before, like juju and Aria. The calm, confident Nana I had known all my life was now a nervous wreck.

Now, after thinking about that day over and over, I realized the Maddocks had made a mistake in taking my parents. Sure, they were good teachers and extremely smart, but they weren't the best in their field. That's what the Maddocks did, after all: they took the best. When

the kidnappings first began, everyone thought they were random, but after a few years, we realized that the abductees were all adults at the top of their profession; the greatest engineers and physicians, company CEOs and programmers, talented artists and dancers.

Even though the news now reported that my parents had to have been the best because they were taken, I knew better. Some didn't fit.

Nothing in my life really "fit" before, and nothing mattered except for my parents, which was probably why Nana seemed so used when she decided to go along with her to the street market. I was always so caught up in my own thoughts nowadays, I never went anywhere with her. I didn't want to go away, but I'd always gone with my parents before, and the reminder of them was worth the risk for freedom.

But as we drove out of town I wasn't familiar with, I realized I had never taken me to this market before. After the first kidnappings, most of the major storeowners in town moved, and little street markets like this one popped up in random places.

Much of our food came from the garden Nana had planted soon after she moved in, but the weather was oddly cold lately, and some things weren't growing well, so it was time for an impromptu market visit.

Nana stopped the car, and we both stepped out.

"I need to get a few things." She removed several fabric bags from the trunk. "You can look around, but meet me back here in half an hour."

I knew I had to savor this. Unless I was at school or Nana's weekly bridge games, a half hour of freedom was usually all I got before Nana's anxieties got the best of her.

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“Yeah, okay.” I sagged against the car door. Nana walked to the nearest food tent advertising locally grown strawberries, potatoes, and corn.

My body shivered in the crisp air, and after putting on my sweater, I took out my pink phone and called the number for the FBI agent supposedly assigned to finding my parents. He had visited me in the hospital, told me his name was Agent ██████████ and asked me to call him if I needed anything. Since then, I’d called him every day, but he never answered my phone. Not even once. It was like he had never existed.

After leaving yet another message on his voicemail, my heart sank. I needed distraction.

People stared at me as I walked through the market. I glared at one woman who stopped dead in her tracks to point me out to her young daughter. Come on; how rude could you be? I walked past her and tried to ignore them, but their stares followed me to my back.

The smell of barbecue and kettle corn filled the air as I strolled alongside the tents. One of them, a bright red one, caught my eye. This tent didn’t have food, but books. It seemed as though people were avoiding it, even going out of their way to dodge it, which made me smile. The sign on the pavilion said Weeping Kumula. Beside the name was a beautifully painted tree. It looked just like a Weeping Willow, but instead of long green leaves, it had thousands of tiny magenta flowers hanging from its fluid branches, and its trunk was glittering silver.

I couldn’t help myself as I strode toward the vibrant books. Each one was a different color, but the way they were laid out was like the composition of a painting. Wondering if I could do the same artistic thing with the hundreds of books in my room, I carefully took out a