



ONCE UPON A PORTAL

A LOVELESS LETTERS
SHORT STORY

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Sandra McGinty sat in the same corner of Loveless Letters Bookstore every Friday afternoon, in the break of time she had between school letting out and her mom getting off the late shift. Every Friday she rushed with her overstuffed backpack to the store where she selected a Joanna Winslow fantasy novel from the middle shelf in the back corner. She ducked beneath the old wooden side table that served as an extra bookshelf, stuffed her bag behind her back, fixed the tablecloth to hide her feet, switched on the penlight she kept in her pocket and settled in to read.

No one noticed her as she entered. She had visited the bookstore every Friday for the entire six months since they'd moved to be closer to her mom's job. She slipped past the checkout, undetected. She selected a book of the week, undetected. She sat and read under the table, undetected. And when her mom texted her that she was waiting outside, Sandra managed to unfold herself, replace the book on the shelf, and slip back out the front door without so much as a glance from anyone around her.

That was just how she lived. Undetected. And if she was honest, she was kind of starting to like it. It was how she got through school days without being bullied. Sure, no one asked her to hang out, but she didn't mind. She had her imagination to keep her company. It was also how she was able to walk four city blocks from school to the bookstore without anyone commenting on how a tiny, teenage girl shouldn't be allowed out by herself in the big city.

Although, she wouldn't have minded so much to be noticed in the bookshop. At least, she wouldn't mind if Lindsay Loveless noticed her. Lindsay was the shop owner's daughter and an absolute beacon of light in the otherwise bland world Sandra knew. She was beautiful, ethereal, and seemed to love books almost as much as Sandra did. If only she could speak to her, just once - But, alas, Lindsay didn't even turn her head whenever Sandra walked through the store.

Every Friday proceeded just like the last. She entered. She grabbed a book. She went unnoticed by Lindsay. She hid to escape free-reading detection. She read. She replaced the book. She left. Rinse and repeat.

Until Friday, October 13, 2023.

On *this* Friday, everything changed.

On *this* Friday, Sandra's invisibility went to an entirely new level.

"Hey stop it," Curtis complained, tugging on his sister's sleeve. "You know we're not allowed."

Sandra heard the siblings bickering from her hiding place and did her best to block them out. It wasn't unusual for them to interrupt her reading with their petty fights. Normally, she waited for it to pass as they moved through the store or when their father, Larry Loveless, came down on them in a low, stern voice, careful not to alert the patrons. She'd take the opportunity to sneak a peek at Lindsay through a tiny gap in the tablecloth. But this time they were incessant. Standing far too close for her to concentrate, they carried on arguing for more than the usual couple of minutes. Naturally, Sandra was at the very best part of the book. She placed a finger on the last word she read and decided to wait it out.

"I don't *care*," Lindsay snapped back. She tugged her arm out of her brother's grip and landed with a hard thud. The vibrations echoed up Sandra's legs.

"You know the rules, Linds. We can't do it. That's not how we play the game anymore."

"Hmmp," Lindsay shrugged. "I don't care if that's *not how we play the game anymore*," she mimicked her younger brother's nasally voice.

Sandra heard a whooshing sound as though someone had opened a window. But she felt no breeze. Suddenly, Lindsay's voice sounded much further away. "I'm tired of playing like a bunch of normies. I want to have some *real* fun."

Another whooshing sound. And now Curtis sounded further away, too.

"The use of portals is hardly *normie*, Linds."

Lindsay laughed and began to recite words that Sandra couldn't quite understand.

Was it Latin? Sandra couldn't be certain. She'd only *read* Latin words, never heard them spoken out loud.

"Seriously, Lindsay. Stop it," Curtis urged.

Lindsay continued.

"I'm gonna tell Dad."

Lindsay laughed. "No, you're not. You know Dad's too busy and doesn't believe us anyway. Besides, I'm done."

Sandra switched off her penlight and carefully moved the tablecloth just enough so that she could see through a crack of light into the store. She wasn't sure what she expected to find but it certainly wasn't what she saw.

About 30 feet away from her, Lindsay and Curtis stood at the end of an aisle of books. Directly behind them was - what was that? An oval of shimmering green light pulsing in yellow and blue tones. She watched as Lindsay snatched a book off a nearby shelf and taunted it in her brother's face.

"You coming or what? Catch me if you can!" She stuck out her tongue and leapt toward the green light, disappearing behind its shimmer.

Sandra did her best to stay quiet but a tiny gasp escaped her lips. She watched as Curtis swung his body around to look in her direction. But, like everyone else, he didn't manage to notice her tucked beneath the table.

He let out a sigh of defeat and let his head sink low. "You *know* we're not allowed to use the books," he muttered as he stepped into the light behind his sister.

Sandra felt something tugging and pulling inside her. Something she'd never experienced before. An urge to be a part of something. She had no idea what was happening but it felt like something straight out of a Joanna Wislow book and she just couldn't hold herself back. She pushed her way out from underneath the table, abandoning her things and, undoubtedly, her mind. She ran across the shiny wooden floor and jumped into the green light as it began to flicker before her eyes.

In a split second both Sandra and the light had disappeared from the store.

As the light enveloped her, Sandra felt an immense warmth but it was quickly followed by a frigid cold that chilled deep beneath her skin. She inhaled sharply, feeling the cold cut into her lungs. The shock of it was enough to stop her for a moment; enough to make her pause in disorientation before she realised what had actually occurred.

She had been transported.

The air was cold and the world was dark. The sky cracked with purple lightning above her and the ground was soft with snow beneath her feet. She took it in, for a moment, in complete disbelief. Crooked trees with gnarled branches blocked the view in front of her. A forest darker than any she'd ever seen. The lightning moved horizontally across the sky, entangling itself. Not a single cloud was in sight but snow began to fall. Just a dusting, at first, tickling the bridge of her nose as its cool touch caressed her. Then, suddenly, more. And more. As if someone had dumped a drift right on top of her. It just kept coming.

Sandra panicked as the snow went from toes deep to knees deep and just kept gaining. Inch after inch. Second after second. She looked behind her, hoping to find the portal still present. It was gone.

She ran for the treeline hoping it would offer shelter. Every step toward the trees seemed harder. The snow grew deeper and deeper. Until, all of a sudden, her steps grew lighter, easier. The snow disappeared before her and she felt warmth, as inexplicable sunlight graced her cheeks. Her mind flooded with relief. But it was too soon.

She was approaching the forest and it looked even nastier than when she'd seen it from afar. The gnarled branches of the trees began to sway and move as though they were reaching out to grab her. Her breath caught in her throat as she watched dark shadows moving among them. Lurking. Waiting.

"Who the heck are *you*?" a voice bellowed out from behind her.

Sandra turned and saw Curtis approaching, dressed from head to toe in what looked to be animal skins and furs. He carried a long spear in his left hand and looked much older than usual.

"Uh - uh. I'm, um," Sandra stammered.

"Oh, no." Curtis's shoulders slumped. He began to talk to himself in a high pitched, panic-ridden voice, "She's a normie for sure. And do you remember what happened *last* time a normie followed us through a book portal? Oh, of course *I* do. But does Lindsay? Well she sure doesn't seem to care. And this is why they're off *limits*, Lindsay. And this is why we ever play while the store is still *open*, Lindsay."

"Um. Excuse me," Sandra managed in a mousy tone.

Curtis jolted back to attention. Broadening his shoulders he looked her up and down. "Hmm," he mused with a new found confidence, "what to do with you?"

Sandra looked around herself in astonishment - the shock still thick in her mind. "What *is* this place?" she asked.

"Don't tell me you've never travelled to the magnificent Ashen Afterworld?" he asked in a terrible British accent.

"The -" she cut herself off as the words sunk in. *The Ashen Afterworld*. It was a Joanna Winslow novel. But if *this* was the Ashen Afterworld, then that meant -
It took far too long to sink in.

Curtis was growing impatient. "Yes," he said. "The Ashen Afterworld. The great, the wonderful, the terrible, the terrifying. The one. The only."

"But - But it's not real."

Curtis flicked his hand into the air and swirled it around. "Anything is possible," he embellished his accent even further, "if you believe."

Sandra didn't understand. She couldn't understand. There was simply no way to have gone from the bookstore to the book.

"I read this last week," she said with an airy tone. Her mind wandered into the pages she soaked up only seven days earlier. "It looks different than I imagined."

Curtis snickered.

"But, how?"

A thunderous sound shook from above them and the sun sank into the distance as shadows of galloping horses tore through the sky.

"No time to answer that now," Curtis squealed in his regular pubescent voice.

He grabbed Sandra's arm and began to run, tugging on her so hard she thought her arm might pop right out of its socket. She fumbled her feet beneath her to keep up without

being dragged. They moved quickly toward the forest as the pounding sound of giant hooves roared down from above them.

"I don't think we should go in there!" she yelled over the sound.

But Curtis either couldn't hear her or he wasn't listening. He ran faster, pulling harder. Sandra nearly tripped just feet from the forest's entrance.

As they broke into the dark shadows of the trees Curtis didn't slow his pace. Not when the wall of darkness hit so hard they could barely see, and certainly not when the gnarled trees began to reach down and grab for their shoulders. He gripped her arm even tighter and pulled her along until they reached the mouth of a cave.

Though the terrain wasn't entirely as she had imagined, she knew precisely where they were. The Cave of Lost Souls. A hiding place for the few human-like creatures that called the Ashen Afterworld home. According to the book, the lost souls were those who never really made it from the world of the living to the land of the dead. They were trapped in the Ashen Afterworld, forced to replay the events of their lives in a foreign landscape with only their memories to fill the voids of the people and places they once knew. After decades and even centuries of toiling away in the Afterworld among the creatures that lived there, the lost human souls, themselves, became less and less human. Many of them forgetting the basic human qualities of kindness and care. Settling, instead, on feelings of anger and disdain. This cave was the last place Sandra wanted to be.

As they descended a slippery rock slope deeper into the cave Sandra noticed the soft glow of natural light bouncing off the uneven walls. A gentle rustling stirred as they approached it.

"I know you're there," Curtis called toward the rustling. "And the game is over. Come out, now. We have bigger problems."

A heavy sigh echoed through the chambers of the cave.

Lindsay's voice rang out, annoyed, "And *what* exactly is such a big deal that you'd stop the game?"

As they rounded the final corner toward the flickering light of Lindsay's torch, Sandra took in a deep breath. All her worry about the snow had melted. All her fear of the thunderous hooves had galloped off. Though the unsettling terror of the lost souls still hung heavy inside her, it was meeting Lindsay, face-to-face, that had her feeling as though she could throw up all over her running shoes.

She kept her eyes focused on the floor as they came around the corner. She was infinitely aware that her very presence in this otherworldly place had ruined something for the siblings. This was *not* the first impression she wanted to make on Lindsay Loveless - not that she had any reason to believe a senior would be interested in her, anyway.

Sandra felt the air change as they rounded the corner. It was heavier and full of Lindsay's long exhale.

"It wasn't my fault," Curtis blurted before Lindsay could say anything.

She pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow. "Did you close the portal behind you when you came in?" she asked, sounding like she knew the answer.

He shuffled from foot to foot. "It wasn't my fault," he repeated, this time with more force. "As soon as I came through there was already something after me. I ran. And I had to keep running. There was no time to close it."

Lindsay let out another long sigh. "Well at least the one I opened doesn't go both ways. But you *know* the rule of three, Curtis. You *knew* it would stay open. Why didn't you go back to close it?"

Curtis puffed his chest. "I *did*. That's when I found - her."

His tone cut Sandra deeply. She missed being invisible. She wished that they would have just not noticed her like everyone else. Her mind bounced back to the times she hadn't been quite as invisible at home. The times that her father had made her *wish* she was invisible and all the ways he'd made her feel like an utter mistake. It'd been years since he left but the wound still ached. She thought about the looks of contempt, the eye rolls, the huffs, the frustrations at her tiny child mind and its inability to grasp the very adult responsibilities he thought she should be able to handle. All while her mom worked long hours and he just sat on the couch drinking and watching TV. A sinking feeling of shame and disgust filled her as she bounced through the memories in her own mind. She wished she was truly invisible.

"Well," Lindsay carried on, "I guess it doesn't matter *how* we got in this situation. We're here now. We have to get her back before anything crazy happens. I don't need to remind you about Peggy Sue Whittaker."

Curtis turned toward Sandra who was standing behind him. "Come on, let's -" he trailed off.

"Well, where the hell did she go, Curtis?" Lindsay demanded.

"How the hell am I supposed to know?"

"What do you mean?" Sandra asked, quietly.

Curtis jumped back, catching his foot on a rock and twisting his ankle as he fell to the ground. He let out a sharp squeal.

"Are you OK?" Lindsay knelt down by his side.

"Yeah. Well, no. But that's not important." He turned his attention back to the alcove where he just stood. "What did you say?"

"What did *who* say," Lindsay asked.

"Shhhhh," he hushed her, throwing a palm up in her face. "Say it again," he spoke to the alcove.

"I said, 'What do you mean?'" Sandra repeated, stuttering her words in confusion. "Did I startle you? I'm sorry if I - I know that I don't talk much so sometimes I catch people off-guard. I didn't mean to." She tried to hide her face behind her hands.

Curtis's jaw dropped as he looked over to Lindsay who looked straight back at him with the same confused expression.

"Um," Lindsay cleared her throat. "Whatever your name is - Wait, what *is* your name?"

"Sandra," she answered, not daring to look Lindsay in the eyes.

"OK. Well, Sandra, it appears as though you are, well - "

"You're invisible," Curtis blurted.

Lindsay shot a dirty look in his direction. "Where *does* your empathy live, anyway? Your butt?"

"Well at least *my* butt isn't the size of a car," he snapped back.

"Wow. Insult of the century over here folks." Lindsay rolled her eyes and turned attention back in Sandra's direction. "Still there, girl?"

Sandra shook her head.

"Shit, she's gone," Curtis let out a huff.

"Oh. No. Sorry," Sandra offered. "I'm here. Sorry."

Lindsay grabbed Curtis by the elbow to help him off the floor. "No, invisible girl," she said as she hoisted him up. "We're sorry. You shouldn't have been able to cross the portal in the first place." She scowled at Curtis.

“No,” Curtis interjected. “There shouldn’t have *been* a portal in the first place, Lindsay.”

“Whatever.” She let go of his elbow and watched him tumble toward the wall. She let a snortling laugh escape her lips. “Invisible girl. We need to get you home.”

Sandra shook her head, again, before remembering. “Yes,” she answered, quietly. “I guess that would be good. But -” she hesitated, “will I be visible *there*?”

“No,” Curtis jumped in.

“*But*,” Lindsay continued for him, shooting him another death stare, “we know someone there who can help.”

“OK.” Sandra wasn’t really convinced but what other choice did she have? She wondered, though, “How did this happen? Why am I invisible? How did we even get here? How are portals real? And why did this one lead inside a book? And aren’t you scared here? Where are the lost souls? Can they hurt us? And who was that girl you mentioned? Penny Lou?”

“Lots of questions, invisible girl.” Lindsay hooked her brother’s arm around her shoulder. “And while I’d love to answer them all, let me just answer one. *We* are safe here,” she motioned between herself and Curtis, “because we’re of a special lineage. It’s a long story. We come here to play games. But *you* obviously are not safe here.”

Curtis hopped in, “You know the special magic in the Ashen Afterworld?”

In all the commotion, Sandra had forgotten one crucial thing about the Afterworld. You always get what you wish for.

“Oh, no,” she barely managed to speak as the air depleted from her lungs.

“Oh yes,” Curtis answered. “And that’s not the worst of it. Everything here can get you. The Gorbel Trees can gobble you. The Death Stampedes can stampede you. The -”

“She gets the point, Curtis.” Lindsay moved forward a step, urging him with her. “We need to get moving and we need to get moving now; before the souls return for their nightly feast.”

The siblings moved forward, one hobbly step at a time, and bumped into Sandra as they made their way toward the opening of the cave.

“Hang on to my shirt, invisible girl,” Lindsay urged. “I can’t lose you in this story and I can’t hold onto you while helping this one limp his way through the forest.”

Sandra did as she was told and gripped Lindsay’s shirt like it was the last thing she would ever touch. Beneath the intense fear, her nausea grew. To be touching Lindsay Loveless’s shirt - she could die. She shook her head. She just *might* die if she didn’t pay attention.

As they approached the cave’s entrance a hushed movement rustled in the dead leaves surrounding it. Lindsay looked back in Sandra’s direction, failing to find eye contact, and pulled a quick finger to her lips.

Sandra nodded, not that Lindsay would know.

“Well, Curtis,” Lindsay said louder than necessary. “You’ve gone and done it again.”

Curtis let out a nervous laugh. “Yep,” he said, firmly planting his hands on his hips. “I sure have.”

“Time to get you home.”

Lindsay moved further toward the opening, sweeping Sandra gently to her side with a smooth motion of her wrist. The warmth of Lindsay’s skin against her arm was distracting and Sandra almost slipped. Before she could let her mind get too wrapped up in the fuzzy feelings inside her, she saw something terrifying out of the corner of her eye.

Huddled around the cave's entrance were six strange creatures. All were about her height or taller but they seemed small in the way their bodies hunched forward. Oversized shoulders and growths on their backs gave them the appearance of having been boiled alive. Their pale, ashen skin hung from their grotesque frames, fraying in places as though it had been melted onto them. Their eyes were wild and bloodshot - their pupils so large they swallowed the iris whole. The creatures grunted and clicked at one another as they crept closer to the cave. One upturned its nose and began sniffing the air. Was it searching for something? Sandra could have sworn it's wild eyes caught her own and it took everything she had to hold in the gasp that tried to escape her.

"Sorry, all," Lindsay excused, much less nonchalantly than she intended. "We'll be out of your way very soon." She made her way up the slippery hill and out of the cave, tugging Curtis up with her, and feeling beside her to make sure she hadn't lost Sandra.

The creatures moved from side to side, pacing impatiently. Sandra watched as their eyes narrowed and the deep wrinkles of their foreheads furrowed. She backed up, slow, as Lindsay pulled Curtis over the last of the hill, and the tiniest twig snapped beneath her foot. Everything stopped. The creatures immediately turned their attention in her direction. Lindsay, Curtis, and Sandra all stood as still as possible.

"Oh, clumsy me, always stepping on things," Lindsay explained. But it was of no use. The ears of the lost soul creatures were keen and they sensed the sound was not from Lindsay's footfall. They paused a moment, each one lifting its nose into the air to sniff for the invisible intruder.

Sandra watched as the one with the wildest eyes raised its arms and ducked its head.

"Run!" Lindsay yelled.

As Sandra began to run, she could hear the quick feet of the lost souls close behind her. The trees whipped their branches down to catch her, grazing her face and arms with their leaves as though they could sense where she was but just barely. She hurled herself over boulders and through ditches running forward and not once looking back. She ran for what felt like an eternity until her legs were so tired and weak they felt as though they would crumble beneath her. And even then, she ran further.

Finally she saw light through the twisted branches of the trees and ran hard for it as her heart beat like thunder in her chest. She hadn't a moment to think before she began to run. She didn't think to run back in the direction she and Curtis had originally come. She didn't think to grab hold of Lindsay, again, hoping they would run together. She breached the edge of the forest, knowing from the book that the lost souls could not follow her out.

She collapsed immediately in the dewy, green grass and panted for air as she laid on her back staring at the sky. Wispy pink and purple clouds swirled in the tangerine sky as the sun began to set behind the trees.

Sandra's momentary feeling of relief quickly passed as she realised she was alone in this strange world. And invisible. How would Lindsay and Curtis find her? Would they even come to look for her? How would she ever get home? And what would she do if she couldn't?

"Come on, Sandra," she said out loud to herself. "Pull yourself together." She almost told herself she had been through worse but she almost surely had not. She did have one thing on her side, though. She knew this story. She'd *just* read this book. She needed only to calm her mind and quiet her worry long enough to recall it.

She sat up in the grass, elongating her back to the best posture, turned her head slightly toward the warmth of the sun, and closed her eyes. She drew in a deep breath

through her nose, noticing the sweet scent of nearby flowers as she did. She held it a moment and exhaled it slowly. She repeated the inhale, the pause, the exhale. She imagined all of her worries hopping on board a train and pulling away from the station. One by one, she waved goodbye to them and watched them go. They were serving her no longer. As she emptied her mind she felt a sense of peace and calm come over her.

She let it wash over her mind for a moment before travelling backward in her memories to pluck out what she knew of the Ashen Afterworld. She'd read a few books in the week that had passed so it took a moment to remember precisely which storyline she needed. She travelled through the pages one by one, rereading the most important parts in her mind. She wasn't able to remember much in detail but the feelings and the images sprang to life as she envisioned her hands tracing the words, line by line.

"Ah ha!" she sprang to her feet. She knew exactly where to go. Judging by the position of the forest she'd just escaped and the hills she found on the horizon across from the forest she knew that the only chance she had at being saved was to head north.

She glanced back in the direction she'd come, hoping to find Lindsay and Curtis emerging from the forest in search of her. Nothing. With a sigh, she started what she knew would be a long walk on weary legs. She was just thankful nothing was chasing her and that she'd run to the forever summer side of the forest where snow and thunder horses wouldn't be a problem.

The walk was uneventful and, though Sandra was thankful for that, she had to admit there was a strange rush of excitement in the hurried commotion of the chase. Its effects were dwindling now, though, and as the sun sank lower in the sky her energy depleted. That's the thing about storybooks. They don't always tell you much about the geography of a place or the distance between one location and another. With every second and every step she grew more uncertain of her own mind. Maybe she should have stayed where she was. Maybe she shouldn't have trusted her memory so much. What if she was heading in the wrong direction? Lindsay and Curtis would never find her.

She thought back to the argument they had in the cave. Lindsay's voice echoed in her mind, "*I don't need to remind you about Peggy Sue Whittaker.*" Who was Peggy Sue and what happened to her? Was it happening to Sandra right now? And what did she mean when she said "the rule of three?"

Tired, sore, and with a mouth so dry she could hardly pry her lips apart, Sandra crested a hill just as the sun let out its final breath of light. And as she panned the horizon she thought she saw *it* in the distance. She *wasn't* wrong. This *was* the way. But the light faded so quickly she couldn't be sure. Imbued with a new sense of hope she began to run down the hill faster than her legs could carry her. Within seconds she was tumbling through the soft grass, thudding hard on the earth with each roll and flip. She landed in something wet at the bottom of the hill. But she wouldn't let it stop her. She pushed her aching body from the ground and searched the black horizon for a sign of life. She was dizzy and her eyes were taking their time to adjust to the darkness but she could faintly make out a warm yellow light in the distance.

"The cabin," she said aloud to herself. "I have to get to the cabin."

It was too dark to run safely so she walked as fast as she could while feeling around with her hands. What was probably five or ten minutes felt like an hour or longer as her legs spasmed beneath her. As she grew closer, she felt a renewed strength inside her.

The scent of vanilla hung heavy in the air, enveloping her nose and drawing her closer to the cabin. The warm glow of firelight throbbed through the windows in beat with the

ache in her head. Faintly, she made out the sound of a simple melody as it wafted through the air from the open cabin window. *Enchantra*.

The melody ceased abruptly.

Had she spoken it out loud? She was certain she had not.

A figure moved across the floor behind the open window as Sandra stood unbelievably still only feet from the cabin's arched, wooden doorway.

"I know you are there, child." Enchantra's singsong voice was even sweeter than Sandra had imagined when reading the *Ashen Afterworld*. It felt like velvet in her ears.

The old wooden door creaked as it slowly swung open to reveal the majestic white witch. Her billowy chestnut hair swept across the floor as she moved aside to welcome Sandra into her home.

"You must be tired," she said as she drew a chair out from the small dining table in the middle of her cabin.

Sandra couldn't help but let a gasp escape her as she entered the cabin. It was exactly as she had imagined it. No doubt because Joanna Winslow was such an impeccable writer she had outlined it in exquisite detail, right down to the bottles and jars on the table, knots in the pine walls, and the scratch marks on the floor from when Enchantra had fought off the Dorwells.

"Your friends should be along any minute," Enchantra soothed. "You may as well relax your legs. You've been running for far too long." She opened the steel doors of her clay oven and pulled out a pie. "Maybe this'll cool in time for you to enjoy a taste before you're on your way."

Sandra's thoughts were too fast for her to chase. How did Enchantra know she was there? How did she know everything that had happened? And how did -

"Wait," she finally spoke aloud.

Enchantra turned to her with a smile that grew far too large, far too quickly. It gnarled up the side of her face in a twisted line then parted to reveal crooked, jagged, yellow teeth.

"You're not Enchantra. You're -" Sandra stood too quickly and her legs wobbled beneath her. "Benetra." The name hardly passed her lips before she fell to the floor. A crippling pain seared its way through her body.

Benetra laughed. "I see you're a pretty sharp one, then." She tugged at her hair and Sandra watched as it turned jet black. The colour flowed to her roots then tinted its way down her dress until she was enveloped in darkness. "Finally, a mortal to feed my hunger." She threw her head back in cackling laughter.

How had she forgotten about Benetra? How could she have overlooked one of the biggest pieces of the entire *Ashen Afterworld* storyline? Benetra was Enchantra's evil sister, hell-bent on destroying the entire forever summer sector of the *Ashen Afterworld* and claiming it as part of her territory. It was she who was behind the Death Stampedes and it was she who had cursed the lost souls.

The pain was too strong for her to fight it. She couldn't stand but she knew she had to. If Benetra was right and Lindsay and Curtis were on their way -

"Oh, don't you worry about your funny little half-mortal friends. I can't hurt them here. But it doesn't matter. All that matters is that I have *you* and *they* cannot stop *me*."

She had to be careful of her thoughts.

"Yes you do, child. I hear *all*." Another cackling laughter bubbled forth.

Sandra closed her eyes, quieted her soul. She took a deep breath. Held it. Waited. Let it out slowly. And repeated. She remembered a trick she learned as a child when she was trying to escape her parents arguing by diving into her mind. Brick by brick, she

imagined herself building a wall in her mind. Each brick was a different thought or sound or image. She built her wall from memories and songs. She built it from episodes of old TV shows and snippets of books she'd read. And, soon, it was impermeable.

Behind her mental wall she worked through her thoughts. She hadn't thought of Benetra because she hadn't anticipated her at all. It was Enchantra who won at the end of the book. But, why had she assumed she came into this world with the story complete? She was *in* the story. Which meant, if Benetra was inside Enchantra's cabin...

She knew what she had to do. She let her mental wall fall just long enough for Benetra to feel her intent. As Sandra willed her legs to move beneath her the pain found its way deeper into her nerve pathways. Benetra's eyes were focused intently on her and Sandra felt her bare down with every ounce of magical strength she had. But Sandra refused to lose. She pushed. She pulled. One leg propped up beneath her, she grabbed hard on the table. She pulled herself up with every bit of strength she could find and just as she gained some footing, the table toppled over. Bottles and jars smashed one after another into her forehead as they piled on top of her.

Benetra sputtered a throaty snicker. "You are strong, little mortal. But you are not strong enough." She planted her feet firmly and began to recite an incantation.

Sandra knew she had to get to the tiny locked door beneath the stairs to the cabin's loft. But how?

The door crashed open with a force strong enough to catch Benetra off-guard and nearly knock her off her feet. The jolt broke her focus and knocked her magical hold off Sandra just long enough for her to get to her feet and across the room to the tiny door. She began fumbling with the lock as a scuffle ensued behind her.

"Well, well," Benetra tsked as she dusted her skirt. "Seems we have a couple of party guests. A little ahead of schedule, no?"

Lindsay and Curtis stood in the arched doorway surrounded in a purple shimmer. The green glow of a fresh portal swirled behind them. With a wave of Lindsay's hand it closed in on itself and disappeared.

Benetra took a sharp step backward. Her face contorted in confusion.

"Oh yes," Lindsay said, her back straight and shoulders back, "I've been practising."

Sandra stopped fumbling with the lock at the sound of Lindsay's voice. It was pointless anyway. It was a solid steel padlock probably sealed with magic. She turned toward the doorway and felt a new jolt of energy rush through her at the sight of Lindsay in all her strength and confidence.

"Where is she?" Lindsay grilled Benetra.

"Ha! Not so powerful then, halfblood. If you don't know where she is then I'm not going to tell you."

"Very mature," Curtis spat, leaning against the doorway to alleviate the pressure on his ankle.

"I'll show *you* mature." Benetra swirled her hands in front of her, conjuring up colours in the air. "Bring forth the power of all that came before. Bestow it upon me. I want more. Make this little boy become as tiny as a mouse and bind him here inside this house. Omnium priorum potestatem pariat. Mihi tribuas. Volo plus. Fac ut parvulum hunc parvulum efficias quam murem, et eum hic intus constringe aedibus."

Sandra watched as Curtis's legs shook beneath him and his dinner edged its way up his throat. He fell to his knees.

Lindsay started swirling her hands and chanting back Latin words of her own. The air was thick with an electric magic that made Sandra's arm hairs stand on end. She watched in

awe, unsure what to do. A glinting caught her eye - the handle of a cast iron pan on the stove.

"Use it," a voice whispered inside her mind. She knew it was Enchantra filtering thoughts into her own from inside the locked cubby.

Sandra lunged forward as quickly as she could, riding the wave of energy around her and harnessing it for strength. She grabbed the pan fast enough to go unnoticed and cracked it over Benetra's head.

Benetra hit the ground with a hard thud and immediately began snoring.

Curtis collected himself off the ground and looked down at the heap of the witch.

"How is she *sleeping*?"

Lindsay squinted her eyes as she glanced his way. "Have you never actually read *any* books in your life?"

"I read this. I just - "

"You didn't finish it," Sandra said.

Curtis jumped. "You *are* here," he said, excitement squeaking through his voice.

"How did you know he didn't finish the book?" Lindsay asked as she moved slowly, confidently, through the cabin.

"He left a bookmark halfway through the last one on the shelf. I - " she hesitated. Should she reveal that she'd been secretly reading the books without paying?

"Oh yeah," Lindsay interjected. "You read this one last week, didn't you?" She tossed a soft glance in Sandra's direction.

Their eyes didn't connect but Sandra felt an entirely different type of electricity rush through her, anyway. She inhaled sharply.

Lindsay smiled. "I've been watching you, invisible girl. Well, when you're not invisible."

Sandra was shocked. She figured she was always invisible.

"I didn't wanna bother you. You seemed happy in your books."

Was Lindsay blushing? Sandra couldn't tell. She couldn't be, though. Could she? She must have just been flush from the excitement.

Curtis cleared his throat. "Um, I hate to interrupt - whatever this is. But, we need to get out of here."

Lindsay's mouth drew tight and her eyes narrowed. "Yes," she nodded. "We do."

She moved to the tiny locked door, knelt beside it, and began to shake ever so slightly as he concentrated hard and she recited a spell.

Enchantra's voice met with hers from the other side of the door as they worked together to break the spell that had locked her inside.

The lock shook, broke open, and disintegrated before Sandra's eyes.

Enchantra pushed the door open and crawled out into the room. As she stood she immediately looked at Lindsay.

"Young one. Your power - " Enchantra smiled and shook her head. "I'm not sure where it comes, but it is deep and transcends the confines of this simple universe."

Lindsay smiled, briefly. "Thank you, Enchantra. Truly. But we really need to leave before Benetra wakes. Can you please help our friend? I know someone at home who could maybe, but you are, well, you. You can do it."

Fear was ripe in her voice. Sandra played the words back in her mind. Lindsay knew someone who could "maybe" help her? She swallowed hard as she pushed away the thoughts that she might be truly invisible forever.

"I certainly could, if she were *from* here," Enchantra explained. "But she is a mortal, young one. I do not possess such power."

Lindsay's shoulders slumped.

Sandra nearly threw up.

"Fear not, children," Enchantra smiled and moved gracefully out of the space between Lindsay and Sandra. "We have a more powerful witch in our midst on this glorious day." She winked at Lindsay who could not believe what she was hearing.

Lindsay laughed, nervously. "You mean *me*?"

Enchantra nodded. "Well, of course." She looked at Lindsay's trembling hands. "Just let the noise fade away and focus."

Lindsay swirled her hands in front of her.

Colours appeared. They swirled. They sparkled. They sputtered and disappeared.

Lindsay let out a sigh.

Sandra cleared her throat. "I, um, I might be able to help."

"By all means little mortal," Enchantra smiled and nodded at her.

"When I'm overwhelmed I have a trick that helps me to focus. I just breathe in and - well, maybe we should just do it together?"

Lindsay nodded.

"OK. So just breathe in." They inhaled deeply. "Now hold it," Sandra instructed. "And just let the thoughts be there." She paused. "Now breathe out."

"Now do it again and watch your thoughts as you breathe in. Then hold it and watch them get onto a train. And when you breathe out, watch the train pull away."

They breathed like that, slowly, in and out, for a few more moments.

Lindsay continued to breathe deeply, and began to swirl her hands in front of her.

The colours picked up in reds and purples. Then yellows and pinks. She didn't speak a word of incantation out loud but the air grew thicker with electric magic. She raised her hands high and the colours between them converged into a bright white light. It grew brighter. Brighter. Then with a crack of thunder it disappeared.

Lindsay refused to open her eyes. "Did it work?" she asked.

"You tell me," Curtis chimed from across the room.

Sandra stood, waiting.

Lindsay opened her eyes and the moment Sandra felt them meet her own, she knew.

Enchantra led them out of the cabin, past Benetra's sleeping body and onto the grass. The short night had already lifted and the first light of sunrise was poking its way into the sky.

Sandra looked around the landscape, drinking it in.

Lindsay swirled her wrist and opened a shimmering green portal.

Enchantra waved as she made her way back to her cabin. "Safe travels, little ones."

Waving back to Enchantra and flashing a sideways smirk at Lindsay and Sandra, Curtis hobbled through the portal first.

Just as she was about to enter the portal, Sandra turned to Lindsay, "Who was Peggy-Lou or Penny-Sue? And what's the rule of three?"

Lindsay laughed. "There's a lot to fill you in on. Let's get home and I'll explain everything."

Sandra nodded. "Can you answer just one question? How did you know where I'd be?"

Lindsay smiled, taking Sandra's hand in hers. "I knew you read the book."