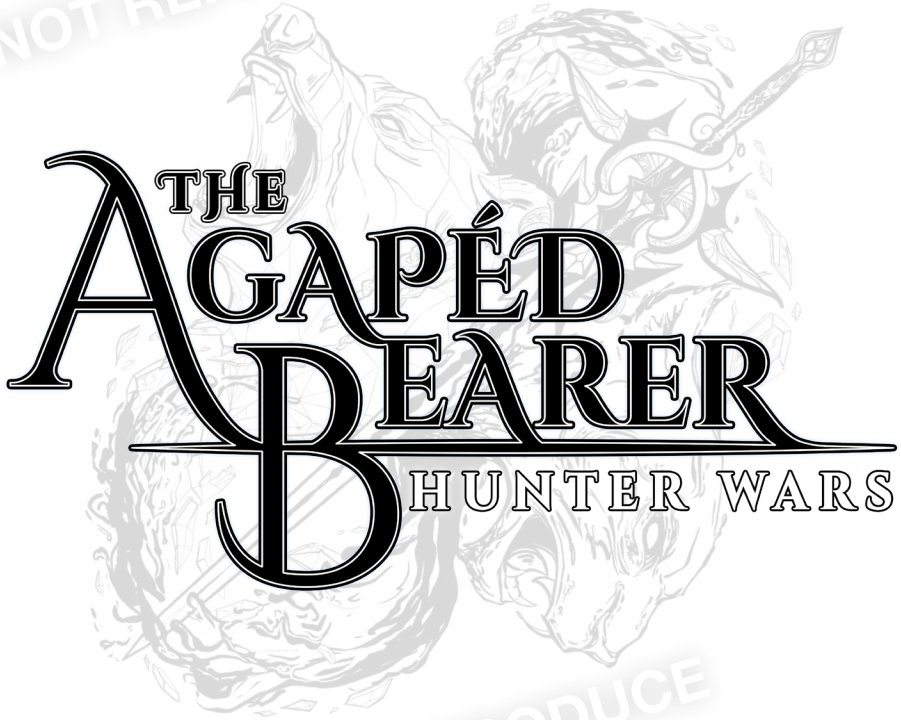


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THE  
**AGAPÉD  
DEARER**  
HUNTER WARS

DO NOT REPRODUCE

**BOOK 3**

HANNAH LINDSEY



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**The Agapéd Bearer: Hunter Wars**

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## I VALENTINE'S DAY

*This is your first potion quest, Gaius had said. It'll be fun, he lilted and smirked.*

Lies. Rugged, centuries-old lies. Though to him, venturing to a land littered with fish corpses and shredded ships probably *was* entertaining. He got to silently laugh at me cringing at all the seafaring haunts as if this was some game. Typical behavior for the Keeper of Stars.

I knew better than to expect some lavish land swallowed in rainbows and birds flying with stars for wings. Yet, I set my dreams up high when I met him this morning for my first potion quest, only to have my hopes smashed when we evanesced to a fish-smelling market near a decrepit port. Nothing about this venture screamed magical. The mobile shops were plenty, while the ragged buildings were few, moored to the ground with actual boat anchors.

I was dressed the nicest compared to everyone else, and that was saying something. I had simply thrown on my black bathing suit from Mantene and a pair of dirty Hunter shorts. My hair was tied in a *rushed* ponytail thanks to the burly Keeper and his habit of never giving me time to prepare for *anything*.



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Everyone else sported their favorite ratty shirt and matching pair of fish-gut-stained pants. No one was here for vacation unless their favorite hobby was gawping at splintered docks and boring pigeons.

The only *good* thing about this foreign town was the weather: perfectly cloudy and *not* below freezing like it was back in Boolavogue or New Jersey.

“Are we buying something here?” I asked Gaius as we left the grimy evanesce sigil smothered with bird droppings. “I thought this was supposed to be my first potion quest.”

“It is, and what *you* need is out that way,” he answered casually, using his green eyes to point toward nothing ahead. Grass and dirt for miles, far away from the town. “Come on. Let’s go.”

My glainie, Tuff—the best pudgy orange memory sprite a girl could ask for—joined me on my shoulder as I trailed beside Gaius. Our minds were linked, and he thought the same as me. *Where’s the road?*

No people were on our path. We weren’t even *on* a path, merely patchy dirt mixed with yellow grass. Broken pieces of wooden boats and bits of barrels patterned the ground, leaving my mind to question what accident had happened and how recently.

Well, those bits of ships led to elephant-sized chunks of sterns and helms, broken and cracking with the breeze. Capsized canoes and fishnets, so frayed they looked like horses’ hay, created disturbing artwork to my right, facing the ocean *way* in the distance. *How did a boat get this destroyed and this far from the shore? We are walking high up on a cliff, not treading sand inches away from the waves.*

I stepped on old nautical trinkets to avoid the floods of rusty nails covering the sailboat cemetery path, but something else worried me more than a puncture to my foot. A tall weathered sign faintly read “DANGER,” and the Keeper paid no mind to it. Crescendoing rhythms picked up in my chest. *If Gaius is making me get some ingredient that is haunted or cursed in this boat graveyard, I’m finding a new potion teacher and magic mentor..*

Tuff gripped my swaying hair as I asked my silent guide, “What exactly are we looking for out here?”

Gaius shifted left, more towards the ocean cliff’s edge. His faded green shirt, his *favorite*, was tight around his frame and showed off his rugged gardener

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physique. The sleeves rolled up at his elbows, and his orbkit dog tag shone through the neckline fabric. His plant weaponry belt girded his waist, equipped with an Aeson Spurge for healing, bloody thorns for attacking, lunavines for a light source, and a firelily sapling if he needed to create a flame.

He was very prepared for *my* potion quest... which made my fear skyrocket because all he gave me was a two-gallon jar that I had strapped on my back and a hand shovel—rusting at the tips and probably a hundred years old.

“Inkumbulo barnacles,” he answered in his deep voice.

Anxiety lowered in my heart... but only a smidge. “Oh, so my first potion is gonna affect the mind, right?”

A small smirk rose underneath his short facial hair.

*Guess my knowledge impressed him.*

“The Memory Draught. It’s a quick, two-ingredient potion: perfect for a beginner. It’s also tricky to get a hold of because Inkumbulo barnacles are hard to find. Luckily...” he turned his gaze to me, proud and confident, “... you have me.”

Three more signs mentioned caution and to fish at one’s own risk near the cliff’s border. The worst was the short and stout wooden plank with a picture of a fanged fish marked out in red. *Please tell me that is paint and not blood.*

Gaius stopped at the rocky rim, ignored the warnings, and crossed his arms. He looked toward the murky blue sea, sucking in a deep breath.

I stood beside him. *Nothing too strange yet... maybe this is just some old battleground... and the water has receded over time. Yeah—that would explain the grated ships scattered miles from the ocean.*

Rolling ripples thrummed along the water. Something large. *Very* large. And slowly, an island of ribbon reef appeared. Staghorn coral poked out from the waves first, a conspicuously pink color, and rows of flowing leaf coral—frosted like blue glass—rose out next like a train coming over a hill. Crusty shells and sticky starfish plopped on the sides of the island, and that was when I noticed car tire-size scales. *Scales*, not rocks.

My heart dropped the moment I saw a tail swishing behind the mass.

“For the first ingredient of the Memory Draught, you need to gather a handful of Inkumbulo barnacles off of *her*,” Gaius said, his voice relaxed.

I, on the other hand, was *not* calm in the slightest.

With my jar strapped on my back and shovel in my hand, I swung my arm

toward the ocean in disbelief. “You didn’t say I had to scrape it off the belly of a *sea monster*, Gaius!”

Like a whale, the giant creature blew a geyser of watery air out of two coral beacons into the sky.

My shoulders jerked. The beast’s echo bounced off the mountains, unfurling for miles. Multiple seagulls squawked and flew in a frenzy.

“A *garganthian*,” Gaius corrected, ignoring my agitation, “and it’s a good magic creature. Just a bit on the large side.”

My hand dropped. “Okay, so it won’t kill me, then?”

Only his eyes moved in my direction, leering at me with a coy glow. “Oh, it’ll kill you.”

I felt Tuff’s fear spike in my head, his orange glitter staining my shoulder. “But you just said it was a *good* magic creature.” I looked toward the water. The garganthian’s tail created mighty streamlines of white waves. The fin *alone* had to be as long as a whale shark.

“Just because it’s good magic doesn’t mean it’s as dotish as a glainie. There are some, like most animals, that aren’t docile. They will defend their habitat, treasure, or—in this case—themselves from you.”

“I didn’t know that...” I pursed my lips and muttered, “Since someone never bothers to document *good* magic creatures in their books for me to study up on.”

The beast submerged, and I took a hefty gulp. “So... are you gonna tell me how to do this, or am I just jumping in?”

“Neither.” Gaius reached inside his tiny belt pouch. He pulled out a slender choker. It was a breethur from the Aquanaeum. “You’ll need this first since you’ll be underwater for quite a while. Garganthians are known not to bother those who are simply passing by.”

I turned around, scanning the boat graveyard to prove his fact to be a *lie*.

“I said ‘passing by.’ For you, I can only say that garganthians think like most animals. They like their space and will attack and devour your magic if you seem like a threat. But you are small and clever, so you’ll find a way to charm it and gather your ingredients.”

I used my free hand to strap the breethur around my neck. A snug fit. Cool air rushed and wrapped around my body when the back button locked in place, the water-repelling magic working properly.

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Both of my hands gripped the shovel as I stood still. My legs were a bit shaky, and my mind had too much to think about, leaving my feet rooted in the dirt.

“... Does it have, like, big teeth?” I asked softly, trying to hide my nerves.

Gaius didn’t hesitate. “The biggest.”

*Of course, it does.*

“Does it crave flesh or just magic?”

“Both.”

*Perfect.*

“Anything else I need to know about before flying off?”

He tilted toward me. “That entire jar needs to be full when you return.”

At that comment, Tuff left my side and perched his little stubby legs on my teacher’s brawny shoulder. “*Fwoote*,” he whistled once, wishing me good luck.

*Oh, he is so lucky he doesn’t have to do this...*

I moved an inch and paused. “You better save me if things start going bad.”

A smug grin toyed his lips. “You’ll be fine.”

*Yeah, says the one not diving in.*

After releasing the heftiest breath of briny air, I pressed off the dirt and flew toward the large ripples in the water. The chilly wind nicked my face as I scanned the waters from up above. At first, I saw nothing but blackness until I realized the giant shadow beneath the surface wasn’t a bottomless dark pit.

*This thing is bigger than two... maybe even three blue whales combined.*

I gripped the shovel tightly and darted for the water, a good distance from the shadow.

Cold waves hit my body as I dove into the ocean, seeping into my boots and tangling my hair. My breathur allowed me thirty minutes underwater before the magic in the necklace would give out and be replaced by ocean bubbles.

I opened my eyes, unfazed by the salt burning my pupils thanks to my glossy-eyed magic perk, but it didn’t help. Below was a never-ending blue depth. No shark, no fish, and no speck of life. It reminded me of last year when Cal and I dove into Nuolja’s waters... but this was different. I was alone. And there was a colossal beast behind me.

*Just do it, Lisa.*

Steadily, I swam around and shifted my eyes down.

The largest being I had ever seen lurked before me, veiled in ocean blues with



two hundred feet of coral running up and down its spine. The garganthian had two fins like a manta ray, decorated with more families of rock-hard coral. Its wingspan could cover a football field. The tail stretched long like a Blue Marlin's if the common fish was the size of a school bus with pink starfish stuck to the scales. Even from where I was swimming a hundred yards away, I could see its scales dimly lit with blue magic each time its tail slowly fanned up and down like a giant dolphin.

The sea beast's mouth wasn't open, yet I could see two fangs as long as a pickup truck poking out. Its nose was rounded like a whale shark, having two slender fins draping under like a fish beard. If it weren't for the teeth, the creature could pass as sort of cute.

But it had *rows* of teeth and giant, stare-into-the-pit-of-my-soul blue and black eyes. *Please don't be hungry for human flesh. Please, please, please, please...*

I used magic to pulse the water around me and jet forward, saving my arm strength for the barnacle harvesting. Closer and closer I came, and the vibrant colors of the coral shone brightly. Magic ran along the creature's giant coral reef, creating a subtle maze of pink and cerulean lights.

The garganthian's eyes looked my way.

*Okay, that is terrifying.*

We exchanged glances for a moment, and judging by its continued slow movement, I assumed I had passed its security check. If it were a normal animal, I could easily read its mind with my Animalian Insight ability, but I only had body movement to go by.

My long, tied-up hair whipped across my face. I knew what the Inkumbulo barnacles looked like, and I finally saw a handful stuck on the rows of blue brain coral. This spot was perfect. It was *far* away from the garganthian's head and teeth.

With my shovel grasped, I swam toward the barnacles. Each spanned the size of my palm and was colored dark blue, anchored tightly to the beast. I needed leverage to scrape it off the mammal while still swimming beside it... and only one option was available.

Never in my life had I touched a fish that wasn't on the end of a hook or at an aquarium. Or this big. And now, I was in front of one with scales as tall as my head.



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*Don't mind me, garganthian... just need to—*

The moment my hand latched on the pink coral, all the magical rays of the beast flickered on like a police car's lights. The water around me pulled off to the right as the garganthian's body shifted, dragging me along with the current.

It turned to face me with an exceptional speed. Both eyes were now white globes with a needlepoint dot that glowed a scary pink.

I didn't have to be a magimarine biologist to know what that look meant.

Fear struck me down like lightning.

*ABORTING THIS QUEST RIGHT NOW!*

I became a human torpedo as the sea beast surged toward me with its mouth of death opened wide. The garganthian was catching up as a salty waterfall blinded me, but I knew I'd be free if I aimed high enough. Water beneath my feet pulsed me higher and higher until—*crash!* Fresh air slammed into my face as my body flew out of the sea.

The moment I was in the sky, the garganthian attempted to follow. It breached high, flapping its fins and showing off its two rows of ten-foot sabers from inside its wide jaw. Though the beast was magical, it thankfully couldn't fly. Boulderling fountains of sea shot into the air when the colossal mammal fell, gushing cold water on me a hundred feet above. The waves created harsh reverberations, shaking the cliff where Gaius was, and they didn't settle down for quite a while.

My soaking wet body floated and hung out to dry as I looked over at Gaius and Tuff. My mentor sat on the dirt with my glainie, grinning, unbothered by the giant monster almost *eating me*. Neither seemed concerned for my well-being.

Before I could say or do anything, Gaius pointed back down to the ocean.

Well, I pointed back, too, only very forcefully, with both hands sprawled out and *no* smile on my face.

To this, the Keeper lounged on the grass for a nap, and I knew all too well what that meant. *We aren't leaving until I get this stuff..*

Though the sea monster was the definition of formidable, if it genuinely was life-threatening and something I couldn't handle, Gaius wouldn't have let me go. His methods were less detailed than a blank sheet of paper and usually as clear as fresh cement. The things he taught me usually came with bruises and bloody scratches, but he made me who I was.

I had just swam into the depths of an unknown ocean and touched a sea monster. Three years ago, I couldn't have killed a spider with a tissue—always needing Mom's help.

*If Gaius isn't stopping me, I must be fully capable of doing this without getting swallowed and chewed to pieces.*

I flew back into the water. The garganthian's eyes were orbs of shadows, and its teeth were hidden away. It was calm. This time, I swam next to the beast, thinking that maybe it just needed to know I was not a threat.

For about five minutes, we swam together. No other attack was made.

*Guess it doesn't like when I touch it.*

Bubbles formed when I sighed hard. *How am I supposed to get the barnacles, then?*

"It loves its tummy clean," I heard something in my brain say, and it wasn't Tuff's inner thoughts. It had to be a fish. *Please be something friendly and not a shark—*

Tension subsided when I saw a remora, a silver suckerfish that typically homed on the bellies of sharks. He swam like a snake with a fangless gaped mouth and was the length of my arm. Nothing about it was cute. Honestly, he was a bit creepy, staring at me and constantly going on and on about the garganthian's dead skin and parasites it couldn't wait to eat.

But its comment on the creature's stomach gave me an idea. I followed the silver garganthian-sucker down below the sea monster. We each avoided the nautical mammoth's long flippers, swimming fast to bypass the current. A few more fish showed up the lower we went, and that was when I saw the creature's huge stomach.

Hundreds of remoras latched on underneath its belly, eating away at the garganthian's old scales and foreign particles. All the fish raved about their lunch and how happy they were; some said this was the best place to eat; some enjoyed the free ride away from predators; the one I followed especially liked—

"The barnacles. Those are best to nibble at," the remora said in my mind before it found a perfect spot near the beast's right fin.

*Ah-ha—*

I scanned the remora-covered belly. Near the beast's chin, right at the start of one of its "beard" fins, was a patch of barnacles free of the remoras. I swam

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up closer. The garganthian still didn't attack, so my free hand slowly extended forward.

*Please don't eat me...*

My fingers gripped the barnacle, and the deep ocean remained peaceful. No magical emergency lights blared from the mammal's coral spine. No intense whips of the tail or fin jolted me away.

I smiled with relief. *I was right. This thing just doesn't want its magical coral stolen and only wants its stomach clean.*

Scraping the barnacles off was like digging away moss stuck to a tree. I was glad. I didn't have the muscles to pull away something this big if it was etched into the beast like a rock stuck in the asphalt.

After cleaning away its first beard flipper, it seemed like the magic mammal enjoyed it. I gave it a good pat under its mouth and hurried off to the other side. Hearing the remoras talk about the feast was pretty funny as I filled up Gaius' jar with water and Inkumbulo barnacles... though I didn't appreciate them sneaking up on me and trying to claim *me* as their next host. Had to shoo them away multiple times. *I can't believe that just twenty minutes ago, I was being chased by this behemoth, and now, my biggest problem is these sucker fish loving my pale skin.*

With the jar full, I gave one last belly rub to the giant creature's stomach and began my ascent. Fifty feet away, I looked back down. The sea monster didn't smile or show signs of gratitude, and it was still menacing with its two fangs hanging out. Both eyes remained solemn and masked in shadows.

When I shot back into the sky, the cliffside lurked hundreds of yards away. I squinted hard until I saw a speck resembling Gaius.

When I soared toward the cliff, the muscly Keeper didn't smile or give an "I'm glad you're okay" remark. He simply straightened his back and woke up Tuff; my orange sprite had fallen asleep on a small patch of yellow grass. "Did you get enough?"

In mid-flight, I slung around the jar, showing it off. "Filled the whole thing, just like you wanted."

Gaius grinned. "Glad it wasn't too much of a struggle for you."

My feet hit the ground, and I flung off the water from my clothes, hair, and shoes. I couldn't help but huff as I handed the jar over. "Yeah, a total piece of cake. You still could've warned me about touching its coraled spine, though."

“Would that still have prevented you from touching it?”

“If I knew it would cause me to almost get eaten...” I rolled my eyes. “But this was probably the coolest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Only you would find harvesting barnacles off a nautical behemoth enjoyable.” Gaius held out his arm. “Bet you think it’s dotish as well?”

My hand wrapped around his muscular forearm as blue evanesce dust filled his fist. “If it weren’t for the fangs and the eyes of death, it would be a rather *cute* magic creature.”

Within a heartbeat, we teleported to one of the secret entrances to Calendula—the hidden city in the Boolavogue Outskirts Forest—and headed straight for the Veradome. Gaius’ peculiar home lay inside the greenhouse palace, right behind a magic door he crafted himself. With a wave of his hand, the star engravings along the frame moved and glowed green, unlatching the lock and allowing us entry.

Winter donned Gaius’ property, matching the same weather of the Kingdom and my home in New Jersey, just without the layers of snow; he hated the white stuff. Off to the right sat his glowing greenhouse. In the middle was a barren patch we used as our training ground. To the left—where we headed—lay his half-buried cottage.

“Are we not getting the second ingredient?” I asked when we stepped into his magic study, my feet almost tripping over some charmbooks I forgot to reshelve.

Gaius went to the door in the far back of the room, right between two bookshelves. “In here.”

My eyes widened. Never once had I seen what was behind that door. It was locked daily, and Gaius never mentioned anything about it. With a greenhouse and a library filled with magical items, I’d almost forgotten it even existed.

*Does he have another magic study? What if there’s a whole other magical realm behind that door? Or what if he has super dangerous plants he can’t keep in his greenhouse, hence the lock?*

The door opened without a creak, and my mind went a mile a minute.

It was his bedroom. Any average person probably would’ve been underwhelmed, smelling the same old bergamot and freshly cut wood scent that wafted through the entire house. Not me. I was different and completely rapt seeing the once-immortal Keeper’s quarters.

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The room was quite tidy and rather large. His king-sized bed was pushed against the back wall, surprisingly *round*; I didn't even know bedding came in shapes besides rectangles. A pale brown, wrinkle-free comforter lay across the hefty mattress, perfectly made with only two teal pillows touching the headboard. The pillows did not coordinate with anything in the room; Gaius probably liked them solely for comfort.

Two shelves barred the doorway, brimful with potions and other magical knickknacks. Most of them, I only recognized from his books, never in person until that moment. There also was a wooden desk covered in papers, illustrations, and empty jars against the left wall, facing Gaius' bed. Though it was an average wooden desk, I still found it fascinating. *Bet he draws all his bestiary entries right there—so cool!*

He did *not* have a window or any pictures of people. Odd. His walls were bare, except for the nailed-down drawings of creatures above his desk. No mention of any type of relationship with past pupils, the Kingdom of Boolavogue, or his old love life. Not even a picture of me. We weren't related, but I won the Paragon Games last year thanks to his training. Thought he would've been proud, hanging the photo that was in the Boolavogue newspapers when I stood with the three co-hosts. *Guess he really isn't the sentimental type...*

"So," I said, pacing a horseshoe shape inside his room, "this is where you sleep."

He huffed and went to the old trunk by his bed. "Did you expect a grand suite or something?"

"No... just never seen you go in here. I was starting to believe you didn't sleep at all."

Another chuckle slipped through his lips as he rummaged inside the box. "Go to my shelf over there and grab the bottle labeled 'numbing goby tears.' It's small and translucent."

My eyes scanned his magic shelf for longer than they should have. I couldn't help it. Gaius had extremely rare ingredients, potions that took months to craft, and over twenty bottles filled with dangerous liquids. One of them even had a Neverending Blue Ringling inside it—a blue flame resembling a ladybug with golden feet—swimming around like it was *alive*.

I saw the tiny flask of the goby tears next to something familiar. My head

whipped around.

“You *had* Inkumbulo barnacles in your house already?” I shot as Gaius donned his typical brown leather trench coat. “And you *still* made me go and get them?”

He plucked the small vial from my hand. “You needed to learn how to gather your own ingredients...” the green in his eyes sparkled, “... and my supply was running low.”

“I almost *died!*”

“I was there. You wouldn’t have died, Lisa.”

“Uh, you didn’t see its teeth!”

Gaius ignored my comment, left his room, and went straight to his potion desk in his magic study; I followed. He plopped the jar of barnacles on the ground and unscrewed the lid. Smells of the ocean coated the room. Off to the right, he grabbed a book and immediately flipped to a page near the front before handing it to me.

The entry for the Memory Draught was half a page. Very simple, only the ingredients being tricky to find, and could be finished in about ten minutes.

“Proceed,” he said.

My mouth turned small as I stared at the page. “You mean... I just... start?”

He crossed his arms. “You’ve studied these books for over a year. Just follow the instructions.”

Telling me to practice magic in front of him was no big deal. Crafting a potion for the first time ran my blood cold. He had made this potion hundreds of times. Heck—he probably *invented* the potion. I knew he would stand there silently, judging me the entire time.

“So... you’re not gonna help me at all?”

“If you mess up, I’ll let you know.”

*At least, he said “if” and not “when”...*

The book lay supine on the potion table as I picked up one of the barnacles and grabbed Gaius’ hammer on his desk. My eyes flicked toward the Keeper; his arms remained crossed. *So intimidating.* I cracked the barnacle into pieces, its fishy scent making me cringe. Still no word from the man. I did the same with the rest and brushed them into a heat-resistant flask.

We both waited for the barnacles to burn, which didn’t take long. They were

magic-filled and turned to ash in less than five minutes. No flame even touched them, yet they still roasted into flaky bits.

Before I poured their ashes into the clean, soon-to-be Memory Draught jar, I glanced at Gaius again for approval.

He said nothing, meaning I was still doing it right... or well enough.

When I added the cup of numbing goby tears to the glass, all the ashes simmered like hot soup before dissolving into the water. Morphing. A murky blue color filled the warm jar, swishing around like goopy cough syrup.

“So... it says ‘dark royal blue means it’s correct...’ I held the jar close to my nose. *It looks right to me, but is it too dark?* I pivoted toward Gaius.

His shoulder almost brushed my head as he stepped closer to me, scanning the jar. Silence. Then, he said, “The color is perfect.”

A grand smile appeared on my face. That word never came out of his mouth when referring to anything I had ever done.

“But,” he began, my self-praise halting, “there is only one way to find out if it works.” My mentor removed two shot glasses from the assortment of jars inside the potion desk drawer. “The Memory Draught numbs the memories clouding your mind, good or bad. The barnacles you harvested are filled with magic that hyper-focuses on memories, but add in the numbing goby tears, and the opposite happens.”

Gaius poured a tablespoon of the liquid into each tiny glass. “This potion makes you forget whatever you’re currently thinking of. It’s good to use when you need to focus on a task, but that is the *only* time to use it, and it shouldn’t be used as a daily tonic.”

“How come?”

“Side effects.” He placed both tiny glasses and the potion on the table before taking out two pieces of paper and a pen from the same drawer. “It’s meant as *temporary* forgetfulness. Take too much too often, and the magic in the potion will make you forget memories permanently—names, history, common sense, et cetera. Can even cause your magic pulse to forget its ability to wield magic.”

*Whoa...*

I must have looked scared because Gaius assured me, “But you would need an awful lot of this stuff for that to happen, so don’t worry. Now, to test it out, first”—he handed me the pen—“think of something you wish to forget.”



My eyes surveyed the stone flooring when I remembered the phone call that happened this morning with Mom and Grandma. Bitter holiday memories were brought up that should've been ignored—it was February, after all. I scribbled down my thoughts on paper.

Gaius picked it up and read it. “Grandma getting upset with Mom during Christmas two months ago...” He stared at me.

“What? It was the first thing I thought of. Trust me, if you were there, you’d wish to forget the very same thing.” I took command and handed him the pen. “Doubt yours will be better.”

Gaius wrote his down next. Before he could hand it to me, I read his tiny handwriting:

*Lisa harvesting the Inkumbulo barnacles.*

“Wow... glad you like forgetting the memories of us spending time together,” I muttered.

“It’s just for the purpose of the potion.”

We both folded the notes and traded. Then, we each took one shot of the potion, gulping it down simultaneously. My nose scrunched up at the warm, fishy taste, wishing it was pure ocean water instead.

“Couldn’t we have added some Nada Essence to the thing first,” I croaked. “Would rather taste vanilla-flavored fish instead of this.”

“Now, tell me,” Gaius began, ignoring my gripe, “what happened at Christmas?”

*The heck? Gaius doesn’t care about Earthian holidays.*

My brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

He smirked. “Between your mother and her mother. What happened?”

I didn’t know why Gaius was suddenly interested in my family life, but I answered honestly. “I mean, we visited her and Grandpa during Christmas again. The cousins, Aunt Genn, and Uncle Leo were there—”

Gaius held up a piece of paper with my handwriting on it.

I remembered writing that down, but for the life of me, I didn’t know what it meant.

My eyes widened, and I stood on my tiptoes. “Wait, you mean the potion

worked?”

Gaius tilted his chin, to which I made a suspicious smile and said, “So, tell me, where did we get the ingredients?”

“From my room.”

*No freaking way...*

“Uh, then, what’s that?” I pointed to the giant jar of *my* Inkumbulo barnacles.

“The Inkumbulo barnacles I harvested.”

I scoffed. “You’re being serious right now?”

He scoffed back. “I know my own jar and leather casing when I see it.”

To that, I shoved his note in his face.

Immediately, a grand, lofty smile stretched beneath his finely trimmed beard as he turned around to find a lid for my potion. “I would never send you out there to harvest Inkumbulo barnacles. They come from—”

“—a garganthian! And you *did!*”

“Did I? Are you sure?”

“Yes... wait, you aren’t playing some game with me right now. You truly do *not* remember?”

“Those are dangerous beasts, Lisa...” That same suspicious grin plastered too happily all over his chiseled face. “And I would *never* send you out there to swim with them.”

As I stood shocked at Gaius’ words, he handed me the potion. Right along the side was a white strip of paper that said “Lisa: Memory Draught.”

“Congratulations. You successfully made your first potion. You can keep yours on the shelf with mine if you label them with your name. The effect of the Memory Draught will wear off in about twenty minutes since we only took a spoonful.” Gaius swiped over his orbkit. A long, weathered list flew out. “Finish these potions for the next few weeks. You may use my ingredients. If I’m out of any, let me know before you go to find them.”

After I grabbed the paper, the room stood silent. My eyes were on the list, but I couldn’t focus on the words. A recurring question found its way back to the top of my mind.

Prodding began. “So, with me starting potion-making, does that mean I’m closer to finally getting that phantasmal flame teacher you promised?”

Gaius sighed. “I said once you’ve caught up with your Hunter training.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...” My voice softened. “Just kinda hoped that perfect potion changed your mind.”

“You were wrong.” He began to take the giant jar of barnacles back to his room. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Before Gaius shut his bedroom door, the fun early memories of my morning back on Earth splashed into my mind like a hurricane.

“Gaius!” I shouted, causing him to stop walking. Quickly, I swiped through my orbkit’s pockets and picked out the small semi-opaque pink plastic bag. “It’s Valentine’s Day back on Earth. Mom likes to make it a big deal—she already gave me a bunch of candy—and I knew you’d get nothing since you hate holidays—”

“I do not hate holidays,” he interrupted.

I begged to differ.

I gave him the pastry dressed in cling wrap and tied with a pink ribbon. “Well, I *do* know you hate candy, so here are two homemade date bars made with *real* dates and organic brown sugar.”

The sweet treat was small in his hand, though hulky in mine.

Gaius gave a questionable stare.

My eyelids dropped. “I didn’t make them. Mom did.”

To that, Gaius happily retreated his hand, but not before noticing the tiny one-inch card looped with pink string. I had forgotten to take that off. Inside, it read “You’re My Jam! Happy Valentine’s Day!” in pink sharpie next to more hand-drawn hearts.

“Oh, yeah, Mom made these for her coworkers this morning, hence the cheesy card. I promise her cooking skills are better than her puns.”

My mentor continued to study the note as if it were the first Valentine’s gift he had ever received. He said in a low, hefty voice, “I can’t believe, after hundreds of years, this is what a lover’s martyr has become.”

I headed toward my bedroom. “You need to work on your ‘thanking’ skills, Gaius.”

“And you need to hurry up to the castle if you want to become a Hunter before summer,” he said as I ran up the stairs.

I couldn’t see his face, but his tone was happy, and I knew he was smiling.

*I hope my doppelganger is having as good a Valentine’s Day as I am.*