

Jena and Nada

3005, Araam

The White Stone Manor

(For Jada)

Ten year old Jena Mehn fought the urge to uncover her eyes. “Ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three.” She sensed someone approach just before their footsteps moved into the spare room of the white stone manor.

“I think Nada’s cheating!” teased Nama.

Jena giggled and opened her eyes. “Doesn’t he always cheat?”

Nama snorted. “True enough. But you know what that means when he cheats, right?”

“Yep! I don’t have to get to a hundred!” She squealed and skittered towards the door. As she passed Nama, a broad hand dropped onto her back, and she sensed his love through that touch.

“Remember to stay in the building, kiddo,” he said.

“Of course!”

Running out into the hallway, she craned her neck to look for Nada’s hiding place. Because she wasn’t looking where she was going, she ran into Taelin, who picked her up into his broad arms and held her like a baby. She giggled and wriggled up to wrap her arms around his neck. He danced as he made his way up the hallway, spinning past a number of doors that she’d have liked to check. When he reached the parlor, he tipped her forwards, so her head dropped upside down for a moment.

She giggled again, liking this game immensely.

He put her down, settling her feet back onto the wood floor. “There you go, short stuff. A free ride for you.” He brushed a large, gentle hand through her hair and still grinning, he strode towards the front door.

She looked around her at the hall and wondered if she should go back and retrace her steps to search the unchecked rooms for her brother. Or, because she actually knew where Nada was hiding, she might just decide to start the search where she was instead.

Shrugging, she skipped to the stairs at the end. She poked her nose in the door that led to a dark, cobwebby cupboard under the main stairs. Nada wouldn’t ever hide under there, too many spiders and bugs for his liking, and the sensation of webs was too much for his extra sensitive skin. However, she wanted to check all sorts of places to make the game last long. Her part in this game was more about exploration than actually finding him. She could at least pretend to play proper hide

and seek with him for a little while, as if he was a brother that aged on the inside, instead of staying at about the age of five.

The cupboard under the stairs was exactly the same as always: dim and creepy, filled with skittering, fearful spiders, and layers of webbed lace hanging from the uneven ceiling.

She laughed as if it were all a great game, and closed the door again.

Turning, she stood with her hands on her hips looking back down the hallway. Light from the stairwell in the parlor flickered in lines of dust in the mid-distance, and she smiled. This place felt safe.

In the moment of silence, she heard her little brother giggle from somewhere relatively close. She laughed again and jogged to the door leading into the old dining room. It was a big space, and terribly empty without any furniture. At the closest end was a big stone fireplace, with a fully blazing fire inside. She skipped closer to the warmth.

Someone had put a metal frame over the hearth and its surface was carved. There were figures on it, some of them riding horses and others standing, wearing long formal robes with trees in the background and a broad lake in the foreground. She was old enough to know that the metal would be hot from the fire, but in the summer she was going to touch every line and figure on that metal screen, and memorize it in its entirety. Just in case they had to leave again and they couldn't take it with them.

The fireplace itself was carved from a white stone, which was cool enough for her to touch. She ran her fingers around the outlines of ancient flowers and vines. At the peak of the fireplace was a shield with lots of overlapping squiggles, not unlike letters, but if they were letters, they weren't any of those that she recognized from her evening classes. She thought they were pretty, though. Like little pictures of people or squiggly boxes.

She heard her brother giggle again, this time closer. She knew exactly where he was hiding, because despite being repeatedly told off for playing there, he always went back to the same place. She sighed and moved to the nearest door, which led through a little cupboard with lots of shelves, and into a broad kitchen.

Light filtered through very dusty windows to her right, and she could smell the coffee that Asha had made earlier for a meeting upstairs.

The kitchen surfaces were mostly made of stone, with a broad bench running along the wall from the doorway where she stood, and a big kitchen island jutting through much of the middle of the long room. She liked the feel of the white and gray marble. To her, it was somehow more solid than wood or concrete, less likely to be destroyed and therefore more precious in its strength. She reached out and touched the cool surface in front of her. It was smooth and mottled with black

chunks. She moved towards the windows, her fingers tracing the curve of the kitchen island to its peak where she stopped in front of the dumbwaiter.

It had a rolling lid, and as she got close to the bench on which it sat, she noticed the rolling lid had been brought down crookedly, with something caught in one corner making the lines of the door sit at a funny angle.

She pulled at the edge of her brother's jacket, pretending not to know that he was hiding in there.

"What's this?" she said loudly. "Something must be in the dumbwaiter!"

She shimmied up onto the bench, got onto her knees, and pulled the dumbwaiter lid up.

"Found you!" she yelled at the top of her voice.

Her brother giggled at her as he shuffled further back into the oblong box. "Nuh-uh! You can't see me. Too dark!" He giggled again and put his hands over his eyes.

"That doesn't work, Nada! I can still see you! It's my turn to hide! Come on, get out of there. Asha will be mad if she catches you!"

"No, it's nice here. Go 'way." Still giggling, he reached to close the lid again.

Jena laughed, launching herself into the box and at her brother. She landed on top of him, and there was a terrible jolting crack.

They both stopped laughing.

An odd twisting, stretching sounded as if a strong kinetic was bending metal wire. The strange noise continued. Just as she realized they were in real danger, the box dropped and they were falling into the dark. Both of them cried out, but moments later their terror was met by a concrete floor.

Jena was thrown forward into a wall, and the world became dizzy and blurry.

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Nama carried a box of food from the van, inside the white stone building, across the hall, and into the kitchen. He put it down on the stone island. There was an odd feeling in the air and it took several breaths of him standing there to figure out what exactly was causing this feeling of ill-ease: The building was too quiet.

The other children, all younger than Jena and Nada, were asleep upstairs. And while the two of them were old enough to not run around for several hours screaming their heads off just for the nuth of it, they were usually good generators of giggles and squeals. But there was nothing, no sounds at all. In fact it was so quiet he could hear a dripping faucet.

He reached a telepathic hand and stretched out to the edges of the building, searching for two young minds, even asleep he would be able to sense them.

When he found no Jena or Nada on the ground floor, he reached up to the next level. Perhaps they were visiting Nalana where she sat in the sun, knitting. His mental senses brushed across a number of adult minds and the rumble of a couple of sleeping babies and toddlers, but there was no Jena and Nada, sleeping or otherwise.

He knew that Jena was a sensible young girl, and would not have left the building without telling an adult, even if Nada had run off. His instincts told him something was wrong, and that they were in trouble.

“Tae!” he barked, as he turned around to walk back to the front door.

Taelin moved towards him down the hall with another box of supplies. “Yeah?”

“Jena and Nada, you sense where they are?”

Tae frowned at him, stopping mid-step. He closed his eyes for three breaths. “No.”

“Let’s grab the others and do a room by room search, then in the garden. They can’t have gone far.”

Fear shifted into Taelin’s dark blue eyes. “Jena wouldn’t go anywhere without telling us.”

Nama grunted. “I know, let’s search anyway.”

* * *

Jena’s head hurt. It was a throbbing sort of pain that disturbed her sleep. A whimper escaped from her, and she wondered why she was cold. She always slept close to the fire with lots of blankets, so she shouldn’t ever wake up cold.

She inhaled to sigh, but it came out of her in dusty, painful coughs. Her head worsened with the coughing and she wailed. She rolled onto her back, still with her eyes closed. She lifted her hand to her forehead to find it was warm and sticky. Her eyes cracked open and she blinked to clear her vision. It was dark and cold, but there was just enough light to see that her hand was covered in red. She wiped the red muck on her shirt, but her mind was too hazy to realize that the red was blood.

She blinked at the dusty shadows for a number of breaths. She knew something needed attention, that she needed to do something important, but in the blur and fuzz she couldn’t form enough thoughts together to ask, let alone answer that unsaid question.

Slowly, the pain in her head lowered a few octaves and her thoughts coalesced into two word sentences, then three words... then finally, like putting on a pair of glasses after being ages without them, the clutter of noise cleared into her first proper thought.

“Nada! Nada?” She moved her head to look around her. She was lying on a concrete floor. Windows somewhere up high let in a little bit of light. The room was bare but fairly large, and as she looked the other way she saw that her brother lay on his back just out of reach, unmoving.

She tried to roll onto her side to crawl towards him, but the moment her head lifted up off the floor, a sharp stab of pain pierced right through her forehead.

“Nada!” she wailed.

He grumbled, as if she was waking him in the middle of the night.

“Wake up Nada! Wake up!”

His grumble turned into words. “Jena, I want to sleep, let me sleep.”

“No! Nada, wake up. We’re in trouble. I need your help.”

He grumbled again, but she heard him sigh. “What’s this place? Did we play hide and seek?”

“We did!” she said, trying to keep her tears silent and out of her voice. “And you won, Nada. You won.”

“Yay!” he said. “I get cake?”

She laughed. “I don’t know, we’ll have to ask Nama. Can you get up?”

“Head hurts,” he grumbled.

“Mine too, Nada. But can you stand?”

“O’ course!”

She squinted, watching him get to his feet. He moved towards her and looked down, a frown showed that he understood that she might be hurt. He pointed at her. “You got red on you.”

“Yeah, Nada.”

“You crying.”

“My head hurts bad. I need you to be brave, Nada. Can you be brave?”

He grinned at her. “I’ll be brave like mama and papa!”

“Yes, brave like mama and papa.” It was a manipulation, the kind that annoyed her when the grown ups used it on her, but for the first time in her ten years of life, she understood that it was a manipulation for a good reason. And if it worked, it could save both of their lives.

“What do I do?” he asked.

“Let’s play hide and seek. Nama’s hiding, so you have to go and find him.” She felt the pain worsen, and she whimpered. “Then bring him back here so he can help me. You think... you think you can do that?”

Nada knelt down next to her. “I go find Nama.” He patted her stomach. “You be good.” Her eyes closed as she smiled at him. “I’ll... be... good.”

* * *

Jena was asleep. Nada knew she was hurt and he should be scared, but he was good at putting any worry in a box somewhere far away, and playing games. The room was square. There were two doors, each on opposite walls. One door was in a wall with very high windows.

They had fallen so, that meant Nama was up. Help was up. So he had to find the right door. Or he had to find stairs.

He tottered to the door with the high windows. He wasn’t allowed outside without a grown up, but outside meant he could go up and inside again to find Nama.

There was an old black door handle. Round, with notches in the metal. He grabbed it but it didn’t turn like a normal one, it was stuck. He banged on the door and kicked it, but the handle would not turn and the door would not open.

He huffed and jogged across the room, past Jena to the other door. The second opened, but there was only pitch blackness beyond. He didn’t have a torch and he didn’t want to meet the Dark-Monsters that were in there, skittering on long legs.

At the thought of all those legs, he let out a squeak and closed the door again. He stood there staring at the closed door, panting out the terror. He wanted to be brave like mama and papa, but he wasn’t sure he could.

When the panic had dropped down enough for his breathing to normalize, he looked back over his shoulder at his big sister. She always looked after him and was always kind, even when he cheated or got her into trouble. He might not be able to be as brave as their mama and papa, but he’d try for Jena.

With a little whimper coming out of him, he moved forward and opened the door again. The fear rose up, but he stepped through to look for anything beyond. It was some sort of hallway, long and narrow, but beyond the circle of light coming in from the windows behind him, the place was absolutely pitch black. No windows in that place or lights. He wanted to help Jena but that wouldn’t happen if he couldn’t see.

“Hide and seek needs seeing. If you can’t see, you can’t seek!” he told himself.

He backed into the light again and closed the door. He had to figure out how to find Nama. He chewed on his bottom lip. Maybe the solution was to make enough noise so that Nama might come to them?

* * *

Every adult present had searched the whole building from top to bottom, Raha had even crawled into the roof space to check, but all to no avail. Nama had sent the two strongest telepaths in opposite directions up and down the street to see if they could sense them nearby, perhaps they'd wandered off or something, even though his gut told him that Jena wouldn't do that without talking to them, but he still had to try.

He stood in the kitchen where he'd heard them last. The building was still too quiet, and the knot in his stomach had tightened with every report back that they hadn't been found.

He sighed and moved towards the far wall and the back door, which lead out to their overgrown garden. They kept meaning to borrow or steal some lawn mowing equipment to clear the massive yard, so they could then start seeding food crops and fiber plants for crafts, but they just hadn't got to it yet.

He opened the back door and stood at the top of the stairs staring out at the overgrown green. He didn't know what else to do to find the kids. Even though there was nothing more *to do*, he couldn't give up on finding them. They deserved better than being lost somewhere and alone, or terribly injured. Not that any kid deserved that, but Jena and Nada had lost so much already in their short lives that they certainly didn't deserve to have this as well.

There was a crash, like broken glass and he flinched, looking around for the source, but he couldn't see anything. A second smash sounded, and he realized it was coming from outside.

Listening hard, he moved down the steps into the long grass. A third crash led him left towards one of the great trees. As he continued towards the sound he heard yelling.

"Nama you cheat!" cried Nada's voice. "You cheat worse than me! You hide where I can't find! How can I hide and seek when you can't be found?"

A fourth crash sounded and Nama started running. "Nada? Where are you? Nada!"

Nada's voice squealed in delight. "Nama! I found you! Come help! There's red on Jena!"

In the long grass was a set of wooden steps dropping into a stairwell, close to the side of the building. Nama pushed through the overgrown green. As he moved, his feet crushed broken glass and he stumbled on the uneven surface. Narrow windows sat just under ground level, and all of them had been broken.

“Nada?” he called through one of the gaps.

“Nama! Nama! The door’s locked!”

“I’ll beat it down!” he growled even before he found it. “Where’s the red on Jena? Is she still breathing?” He tripped sideways, putting his elbow to the side of the building to catch himself, and it was then he saw an overgrown door.

“Her head. It’s hurt. But she’s asleep.”

“OK, get back from the door, I’m going to break it.”

Nama lifted his foot and smashed the heel of his steel cap boots down onto the door, just next to the hole where a handle should be. Three kicks and he heard the wood cracking. The fourth kick broke the lock through the framing and the door smashed open.

He jogged through into a dusty, dark space. Blinking while his night vision took a moment to adjust, he saw Jena in the middle of the floor, flat on her back with her little brother sitting in the dust next to her.

The boy grinned at him. “You won hide and seek, Nama! Can we have cake?”

Nama chuckled. “I’ll see if I can get some cake on the next supply run. Are you hurt?”

He shook his head. “Jena is hurt.”

Nama reached out with a mental hand with intention of getting someone to bring Nalana downstairs to help them, but the floor seemed to be made of Psi suppressant material because he couldn’t reach above him. Irritated, he only just caught himself before he swore out loud in front of Nada, who had a habit of aggressively enjoying any new offensive words he heard, every day, all day for at least two weeks.

He sighed and forced a smile on his face. “You did really well, Nada.”

“Did I win hide and seek too? Did we both win?”

He laughed. “Yes we did! And if I can get some, we’ll both have cake!”

“Yay!”

Nama gently leaned over Jena and brushed some of her hair back from her face. The wound on her forehead was a straight line, likely from hitting a wall or a piece of shattered dumbwaiter. Her ears were clear of blood or liquid, so she wasn’t bleeding on the brain yet, but her face was awfully pale. He touched her neck, her heart rate was slow too. He wasn’t an empath, so he couldn’t tell if she was hurt anywhere else. He didn’t want to move her until he knew he wouldn’t hurt her more.

“Nada,” he said as he took off his jacket to put on top of Jena. “I’m going to get Nalana, OK? Can you stay here with Jena?”

His little face was covered in dust, and there was a welt forming around one eye where he'd obviously smacked his head. The boy nodded and made a low growl in his throat. "I am Nadaan the guard dog!"

Nama laughed and patted the boy's shoulder. "That's good. I won't be long, promise."

* * *

Jena was warm, but her head hurt. She let out a rumble of discomfort and tried to climb further into the warmth, away from the pain, but it followed her inside. She huffed and opened her eyes. She was surrounded in blankets, but she could hear the crackling fireplace, as well as many Rebel voices rumbling around her.

"Jena!" cried her brother from outside of her blanket nest. "Jena! You're awake, I know you're awake! Look what I have!"

She huffed again, but shimmied up enough to poke her head out of her blanket nest. It was dark all around, what light there was in the room came only from candles, but she could see her brother's face clearly. One of his eyes was closed and black from a massive bruise that covered half of his face. Despite the swelling, and he was grinning at her. He held both hands up and there was cake in each.

She smiled. "You have cake!"

He nodded. "Me and Nama won hide and seek so we got cake. But I got you one too."

A handful of crummy cake was thrust into her face. It smelt very chocolaty, and there was melted icing on his fingers.

She laughed and reached for it. "Thank you, Nada."

Nada giggled and sat on the floor close to her. She folded the blankets back so she could stay warm, but also eat without dropping crumbs all through them.

The first mouthful of cake was glorious. Not only was the cake itself chocolate, and the icing, but inside were tiny hard chunks of actual chocolate as well.

She let her enjoyment rumble out of her. "Mm."

"That's special get well cake, young Jena," said Nama as he moved toward them with his own piece in his hands. "Eating it is a promise to get better!"

She giggled, knowing full well that she had no control over the speed or success of her own healing, but she played along. "I bet I get well ten times faster than normal with this special cake! It's yummy!"

He grunted and sat close, forming the third point of an equilateral triangle with herself and Nada. "It's sure helping my heart after worrying about you two!"

Jena smiled at him. "You didn't have to worry too much! Me and Nada will always look after each other!"

Nada sighed and stopped chewing his cake. "Asha said no hiding in the box, but I did anyway. It's my fault you got red on you. I'm sorry."

Jena reached out to hold her little brother's hand. He'd never apologized for being difficult before. She loved her little brother, even when he got her into trouble deliberately.

She squeezed his hand. "I'm alright now, Nada. But have you seen your face?"

He giggled. "Tae says I look like a boxer!"

Nama finished his cake and wrapped broad arms around her and Nada. Bringing them all together close enough to touch heads. He said nothing, but Jena felt his love and the fear he had of losing them. She closed her eyes and wrapped an arm around his neck.

"I love you too, Nama."

"Yeah, yeah!" crowed Nada. "I love Nama!"

The older man kissed both of them on the top of their heads and let go of his hug. "It's almost bed time, you two. Finish your cake, and I'll make you a hot drink."