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THEY CAME FOR me without warning.

It was just another first day at a new school, which happens a lot when you and your mom are on the run. I couldn't keep track of how many first days I'd had, although the year I went to ten different schools was the worst one. That morning I was supposed to be taking notes about supply and demand economics, but instead I was doomscrolling under the desk.

Experts say the next recession will start earlier than expected. The nation's business economists predict that due to rising interest rates . . .

Strange winter weather in the Southwest United States goes beyond climate change. These "freakish" weather patterns are not attributable to . . .

Police are asking the public for help once more in the case of a missing teenage girl from Santa Ana. Phoenix Xing was last seen leaving school a year ago today . . .

Another scandal for reality TV star accused of cheating on his long-term girlfriend . . .

A shiny black beetle scurried across the floor, pincers waving. *What are you doing here, buddy?* It paused, almost like it noticed I was watching, before finally disappearing beneath the wall. I wished I could do the same. I was desperate to get out of there. High school sucks, no matter if you've been in the same town since birth or if you've just arrived like we did. I wanted *out*.

Be careful what you wish for, as my mother would say.

A crackling voice interrupted over the PA: "Can we have Maria Josephina Robertson-Rodriguez to the office, please?"

I dropped my pencil and sat up straight. That could only mean my mother was picking me up early. Already? Why? Was it happening again?

The teacher—whose name I hadn't even learned yet—nodded at me. Every head turned in my direction. *There goes the new girl*, they were probably thinking. I ignored them, trying to appear nonchalant, and stuck my phone in my pocket, grabbed my worn backpack, and stood to walk out. Behind me, the teacher picked up where he'd left off. *If supply decreases, then . . .*

The door clicked shut. I started down the long, empty hallway toward the main office. I heard the shriek of a chair scraping against linoleum and muted chatter drifting out from one of the classrooms.

I was going the right way, I was positive, because I'd come in that direction from the office only a couple hours earlier. But somehow the hall seemed to go on and on. Endless. Hmmm.

Above me, a fluorescent light flickered, making a snapping noise.

Then everything went silent. No more screeching chairs or

hushed voices. All the classrooms around me were dark and empty. *Probably no classes this period, I told myself. Or maybe they're meeting in the media center. Nothing creepy about it. Right?*

Even my footsteps seemed louder. Each step pounded in my ears. I felt weirdly, impossibly, completely alone.

No—it was just that I was in an unfamiliar place, making me feel unsettled. That was normal. Everything was normal. And I was on my way out, anyway. In a few minutes, I'd be home.

A door slammed behind me. I turned to look, but no one was there. My heart sped up.

When I looked forward again, the hallway stretched on as far as it had when I first left class. *What the . . .*

There were popping sounds, like balloons bursting. I spun around again, stomach in my throat. The lights at the end of the hall were all out. It was pitch-black where my classroom was. In a flash, like dominoes falling, the darkness rushed toward me. The popping sounds grew louder and sharper. Light bulbs were bursting, glass shattering onto the floor.

I bolted for the office.

It's happening.

What my mother warned me about for years.

Here.

Now.

I ran so fast I couldn't even feel my body anymore. I had only one thought: *Get out!*

Then everything went black. My eyes didn't have time to adjust, so I had no idea what was in front of me, but still I kept running. Any second, I'd reach the end of the hall. I'd be near the office,

near an exit. It was right around the corner. Where was everybody? We were covered in shadows, yet there was no sound. No teachers ordering their classes to quiet down. No announcement. No alarm. Nothing.

There was only me, running, in the darkness.

Up ahead, I saw movement. Figures like shadows. Half a dozen or more. Illuminated, just barely, by the dim light coming in through the exterior doors to their left. Sharp relief filled me: I wasn't alone after all. Of course not. Why did I panic? Just a blackout. Staff was out checking on everyone. I slowed to a walk, winded, a cramp in my side.

The figures stopped moving—they seemed to be waiting for me at the end of the hall.

“What happened?” I called, out of breath.

They didn't respond.

“Um, I was called to the office?” As I approached, their bodies and faces took shape.

Oh. They didn't work at the school. Not teachers. Not administrators. And they weren't students either.

Narrow faces with flawless skin and sharp features. Slight frames with long limbs, covered in nondescript black cloaks.

I knew who they were immediately. More importantly, I knew *what* they were. Encantos. Also called fairies, but in my father's language: *encantos* or *engkantos*. Magical creatures hidden from the human realm. There were many types—diwatas were female forest and mountain spirits and human in appearance; dwendes were akin to dwarves. These were mostly munduntugs—hunters.

One of them stepped forward. Dark hair curled underneath his pointy ears. “We have very little time to waste,” he said, his voice a

melodious whisper. “Your father, the king, is dead. You’re in grave danger. We can protect you, but you must come with us.”

“Right now?” was all I managed to say. My mind was spinning. *My father is dead, I’m in danger, I have to go with them.* No, I needed to talk to my mother first. This was why we had been running all my life. To keep me safe from my father’s world. And now his world had come out of the darkness and found me.

“There’s no time,” insisted another. Two of them stepped toward me.

The first repeated himself. “Come with us. Now.”

“But my mother . . .” I began. I couldn’t go without her. She needed to know where I was, what had happened.

One of them took my arm. “You must,” the creature declared. “The others will be here soon.” The cloak moved aside when she reached out to me, revealing an iridescent wing folded at her back. She was from the flying battalion, then. They had sent the best hunters to fetch me.

“All right,” I said slowly. “But what about . . .”

“Your mother will be informed.” She looked anxiously at the others.

The one who seemed to be in charge spoke again. “Of course. Now follow—”

Before he could finish, a giant gust of air blew in, like a storm coming right through the building. We all shielded our eyes but were otherwise frozen in place, stunned by the swirling wind.

The female hunter yanked on my arm and began pulling me away. She shouted to the others: “Run!”

Just as we began to move, I felt her lurch away from me suddenly, and she was gone.

The air settled, revealing another group of fairies—a group of patianaks, with sharp teeth, shimmery skin, and wings as black and glossy as a raven’s. They were the fiercest and most unforgiving of the encanto warriors. I shuddered.

The hunter who’d been holding me was on the floor. One of the patianaks stood over her, his sword driven right through her torso.

Horrified, I stumbled backward, frantically trying to figure out which direction to run in. But everywhere I looked, there were more of the enemy.

The patianaks slaughtered the winged munduntug battalion with ruthless efficiency.

Back down the dark hall was better than whatever was going on here.

I turned to run, but as I did, strong arms wrapped around me.