

THE LOVE INTEREST



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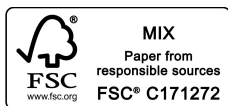
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*For the powerful women in my life,
especially my sister, Janine*

HEROICS AND POWER AUTHORITY

POWERS

Because of the accelerated evolution of the planet (the EV), there are more people with powers now than ever before.

We all know it is the law to register your power with the Heroics and Power Authority. But sometimes people need help to do the right thing.

Powers come in all shapes and sizes. They run in families. If you see someone drain the lights from a room, they could be a conduit, absorbing power like King Ron. If you see someone fix a machine with a touch, they could be a technopath like the Controller. If you see someone fly ... well, you get the idea. Report their family today.

HELPING IS HEROIC

In the wrong hands, powers can be dangerous, even weaker female ones.

Do your duty – report any and all suspected powers to the HPA. Registered people will be helped, tagged and protected.

EVOLVED CREATURES

Be vigilant around nature. Keep an eye out for EV creatures and always remember:

BLUE

Blue eyes

Large body

Unusually aggressive

Evolved creature

To report suspected powers or EV disturbances

CALL 777

Help the HPA to Help You

CHAPTER 1

One day soon my town will need a hero. So it was written by the Diviner in the nineteenth century. And so it was also written by most of the shops in Nine Trees who have used the prophecy to decorate tea towels:

2024

*In the sharp blue heat of truth
A hero will emerge
In the three of three of trees.*

- The Diviner, 1880

'Look, they've got a new line of prophecy posters. What painting have they used?' I waggle a poster at my best friend, Joy. She tilts it to see past the bright lights of the Culture Complex foyer.

'*The Scream*, it's by Munch.' Joy scoops her brown hair

behind her ears. 'I think he painted it as a response to the Rocks Prophecy. You know, the one without a location, but with pelting rain and rumbling land ...'

'And slipping clay.' I hang the poster back in the little gift shop attached to the box office. 'I can see why he'd be stressed.' We drift into the line for cinema tickets. 'Did you see the £35 sticker? Who'd pay that much for a poster?'

'The tourists, Jenna Ray!' Joy grips my arm. 'Do you really need me to explain this to you?'

'N—'

'Imagine—' Joy lowers her voice, like she's presenting a horror podcast. 'You're on your way to the city, but hey, you're passing through pretty little doomed Nine Trees. Sure, a sexy new hero is going to turn up, but no one thinks waiting around for that to happen is a good idea. But! Maybe, you can risk stopping for a souvenir? You don't have time to shop around. You just want to grab a poster and get out before the disaster hits. Thirty-five pounds for a poster? Just buy it. You've already been here for too long and it'll be worth ten times more after Nine Trees has been wiped off the map.' She gives herself a shake. 'It's clever really. A disaster will strike this year and it's only spring. Imagine how much they'll be charging for souvenirs in November!'

'Oh, we'll all be dead by then.' I laugh and Joy laughs and then we both fall silent. I stare at some popcorn lying sadly on the floor and wince as someone steps on it.

'You girls seem worried.' A lady with grey curls joins the queue and smiles gently at us. 'Just because a new hero is coming doesn't mean there's going to be a huge disaster. I've

seen them before, of course. I was a little girl when the power plant malfunctioned and King Ron first appeared.’

I nod politely and elbow Joy, who is rolling her eyes.

‘But remember the Controller?’ the lady continues. ‘His emergence was simply—’

‘Saving a cat that was stuck up a tree,’ we chorus.

She nods, reaches into the pocket of her powder-pink duffel coat, hands me one of the council’s *Carry On As Normal* pamphlets and wanders serenely away.

‘Didn’t you want to see a film?’ Joy calls after her.

I flick the leaflet and decide against bringing up the other hero emergences, the ones with higher death tolls. ‘I don’t need this. My house is covered in them; Dad keeps bringing them home from work. You have it.’ I drop the glossy paper into Joy’s hands.

‘Don’t be rude.’ She pushes it back.

We look at the pamphlet between us for a beat, then Joy jumps at me and tries to stuff it down the front of the oversized cardigan I borrowed from my sister. I bounce back, narrowly avoiding the man behind us. He tuts. Joy giggles.

‘That lady wanted you to have it!’ Joy thrusts it towards me.

‘And I want *you* to have it.’ I gently push her hands back. ‘You’re welcome.’

Joy opens the pamphlet and shakes her head in mock disbelief. ‘You don’t even want this lovely map of all the town’s shelters?’

‘No. I know where they are. They’ve been lit in neon since New Year’s Eve.’

It's finally our turn at the ticket machine. My finger hovers over the screen. 'Did we want the seven o'clock showing of *All You Need Is Love: A Classic Love Story for the Modern Age?* Snappy title.'

Joy drapes herself mournfully across the machine and taps the seven o'clock option. 'Nick left for Portugal today.'

'Uh-huh.' I manage to catch both tickets as they shoot out of the machine.

'Portugal, Jenna. Portugal!'

I pass her a ticket and we wander towards the pick-and-mix stall.

'Is it even any safer in Portugal?' I love Joy, but I'm not sure I've got the energy to listen to Nick's holiday plans again. Maybe I can distract her with sweets?

'There was that whole thing with EV sharks along the coast, but the rustic mountain village Nick's mum chose to escape to will probably be extra safe.' She sighs, managing to infuse her breath with melancholy. 'Is it so wrong to want him and his lovely arms here, to die with me?'

I narrow my eyes at her. 'Shouldn't you want him to go on without you and live a long life filled with love and laughter?'

'Pssst. No.' Joy whacks my arm. 'I've got to wee.'

'I'll be here.'

Joy skips off towards the toilets and I perch on a polished metal bench on the outskirts of the cinema section and play with a curl of my Afro. Even though my feet are now glued to the tacky floor, the Culture Complex is my favourite place in Nine Trees.

It was built the same year as I was born and, for some reason, they decided it should look like a great big greenhouse. Ferns decorate the balcony that runs around the building; green tendrils droop down over signs for the cinema, the library behind me and the restaurant to my left. The front of the complex is made of hexagonal windows. A few wispy clouds drift through the bright spring-evening sky, but even inside the complex the air feels heavy, like there's a storm coming.

My breath catches as I exhale. Before anything bad can happen, I picture a boy with a dark blue swimming cap and a kind smile, water streaming off his strong shoulders as he lifts himself out of the water. Okorie Ogundipe. I don't want a boyfriend, but thinking about Okorie's humble smile when he inevitably wins his race is better than spiralling about our impending doom.

Focus on swimming; that's a more wholesome cure for panic. The feel of the water as I cut through it, the bubbles that stream past as I flip turn, the droplets of water on Okorie's chest after training. Feck. It's not OK to use him like this when I've never even had a proper conversation with him. I'm objectifying him, but he's keeping my heart steady and my lungs full, and it's not like he'll ever know.

'Your green cardigan is too big for you.' A small girl with red pigtails arrives at my lap, pursued by her horrified dad. 'It is pretty though, and I like the buttons because they have glitter on them.' She puts her hands on my knees and smiles up at me.

Frantically packing away the image of Okorie in his trunks, I blink and focus on the preschooler critiquing my style.

‘Rosie! What did I tell you about touching strangers?’ Her dad reaches for her and she dodges, her small hands still pinching the fabric of my jeans.

‘It’s OK.’ I give her a closer look at one of the buttons. ‘I’m glad you like it. It’s the sparkly buttons that made me want to wear it.’

‘Thank you.’ The dad pushes his thick glasses up his nose.

‘Green is my favourite colour.’ Rosie leans on my lap and inserts her fingers into the baggy wool of the cardy.

‘Rosie!’ The dad drags Rosie off me. ‘I’m so sorry!’ He’s gone crimson.

‘You’re pretty,’ Rosie says as her dad pulls her away.

‘Thank you!’ I call after them.

Rosie is dragged through the foyer, past the central box office and towards the family restaurant. I chuckle as she breaks free and legs it for the ball pit. As Rosie’s cry of triumph fades, a strange moment of quiet washes over the Culture Complex. There are still people in the busy foyer, but no one is talking. Perhaps they’re thinking about the prophecy. I place my hands firmly on my lap to stop myself from fiddling with my fingers. The pink light filtering in through a passing cloud makes the golden-brown skin of my hands look almost silver, like I’m underwater.

‘Ready to feel warm, fuzzy and like we’ll never be able to love like they do in the movies?’ Joy is back and clutching an enormous bucket of popcorn.

‘Am I?!’ I leap up to join her.

Walking into a cinema is one of my favourite things. We’re

intentionally late, to miss the adverts, so it's dark when we push our way through the swing doors. It's gloriously disorientating, wandering up the sloped walkway into a cavern lit with images.

'Let me go on the aisle. I always need to pee,' Joy whispers, far too loud.

We settle in our seats and balance the popcorn on the armrest between us, ready to watch the romantic comedy. We thought it would be a good distraction, although I can already guess the plot:

Boy meets girl, they trade quirky banter and—

Oh look!

They have an unexpectedly deep connection.

And oh wow!

They share a life-affirming experience.

But oh no!

Something goes wrong and all hope is lost!

Except it's not. By the end of
the film they'll kiss in the rain
or get married
or something.

As the lead couple rescue a baby monkey together, my mind strays back to the prophecy. I picture a crack running up the middle of our cobbled high street, splitting the earth. A tree falls through the window of the bank and scatters its white blossoms over my trapped sister. I shake my head, but even Okorie won't displace the image of Dad, standing helpless at the council, as my town, my home, falls apart around him.

‘Wait!’ Joy shouts at the screen. ‘Don’t kiss your ex!’

My chair squeaks as I sink down and try to imagine the hero that the prophecy has foretold. He’ll swoop in at the last moment and save the day. He’ll be big, muscly, and have spectacular facial hair. It’ll be like when King Ron appeared in the seventies; the hero will arrive and everyone I love will be fine.

‘Well, obviously she saw them kissing. As if they’d all have the same dentist in LA. It’s like a billion miles across.’ Joy offers me some popcorn and then reaches over to stop my hands, which, I hadn’t realised, had been going through a cycle of rubbing and clasping.

‘Watch the film, Jenna,’ she whispers. ‘It’ll help.’

I nod and put my head on Joy’s shoulder to watch the leading lady cry over what could have been, and what definitely will be, by the end of the film.

‘My bus is in two minutes,’ Joy says as the credits roll and the lights fade up. Halfway into her coat she hesitates, even though we’re at the end of the row and there are people waiting to get past.

‘Don’t worry, Ray. We’ll be all right,’ she says.

‘Let’s do something tomorrow,’ I say confidently.

‘Tomorrow.’ She nods slightly too fast, hugs me, and legs it for her bus.

A band of pressure grows around my head as I make my way out of the cinema, and I pop into the bathroom to splash water on my face. The shock of the cold helps a bit, but the brown eyes gazing back at me from the mirror are still anxious.

Tomorrow, I'll wear my Afro in a side parting and borrow Megan's bronzer, which is the perfect colour to make my skin tone glow. Tomorrow I'll look powerful.

A deafening roll of thunder stops me as I step back into the foyer. Through the glass front of the complex, the dark sky is alive with flashes of light. Even though we're inside, my heart beats faster and I edge closer to the box office.

'A lightning storm.' An usher is waiting with a dustpan and brush. 'It's right on top of us.'

There's a loud buzz and the lights go out.

Gasps echo around the complex. As my eyes adjust to the soft glow of the emergency lighting, I can see the silhouettes of people moving; some heading to the automatic doors, others getting to their feet in the restaurant. There's another blinding flash and a crash of thunder which sounds like the complex has been hit by a tank.

'There's no way I'm going out there.' A man in a *King Ron* hoody leans on the box office next to me.

Has the complex just been hit by lightning? The alarm bells in my brain are jangling, but it's not like when I walk past a big group of people or speak in class. There's a pinch in the air irritating the back of my throat and making my eyes sting. I inhale deeply, hoping that I'm wrong, but the smell of smoke is unmistakable.