

# The Muffler's Mission

*Preview*

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## Prelude – Delusion

It's time to start a new journal. I'm determined to get ahead of events for once and begin writing my account before anything significant happens, rather than play catch-up halfway through again. If that sounds a sensible idea, that's because it was Pythia's.

I must admit that recording what happened from being recruited into the Muffler's Ministry up to the defeat of Cronos – and Tia being turned into a stone chrysalis – did prove remarkably cathartic. A couple of weeks have passed since then, and despite jotting daily events in my diary in the meantime, it's not been enough. I need to vent my frustrations by putting them down as words on the page again – probably too many words on too many pages. So here I am, scribbling proactively for therapy while waiting for Tia to hatch.

As my last notebook was almost full, I decided to retire it and begin anew. At my request, Ashley wrote *The Muffler's Ministry* on its spine in her finest calligraphy, and I filed it on the shelf behind my desk, knowing full well that it'll turn into a lending library.

This feels like a time of change. Something big is going to happen again, and I need to be ready. So I've prised a new notebook from the suspicious grasp of Stores and written Rowan Webb in the middle of the front page to stop someone nicking it, especially as Dave Elkington is always finding excuses to visit the Ministry. The bastard.

Although I've been keeping out of it, things are afoot in the Ministry and the wider community. Having zombies wandering around Gooseport wasn't going to go unnoticed, and now people want to know the truth about what happened – and whether it will happen again.

And then there's my Dad. Just when I needed it least, he tricked me into visiting him by acting unusually reasonably for once. I assumed he wanted to rebuild a few bridges that we'd mutually burned, but naturally it didn't last. At least I know where his hatred of familiars comes from now – and he got a chance to revisit his roof.

I've no time for him anymore. All that matters now is getting Tia back. I have to believe she's still alive in her cocoon, recovering from what must be terrible injuries sustained in the blast that destroyed Cronos. The Oracle wouldn't have instructed us to rescue her from the ruins if there was no hope, would she?

I may be deluding myself, but it's the only thing that keeps me going. All I can do is wait.

# Part One

## Portsea

## Chapter 1 – Anticipation

I know my way to Dr Ian Stait's medical facility in the Muffler's Ministry all too well now. It's fourteen steps down each stairwell, and once I've reached the correct floor, thirty decent strides will get me to a set of double doors. Going through them is like taking a step into another world – from the random informality of the Ministry corridors to the cool efficiency of the hospital wings. Even the air feels different once you breach the threshold.

You can tell I'm spending too much time here as I know everyone's name now. I think every medic, every nurse, every cleaner, every assistant has helped out in Tia's room one way or another. They've been absolutely brilliant. I couldn't have asked for better, more attentive care for her. They're like family now – people I feel indebted towards but would rather not see so often.

After passing through the doors, it's only twenty more steps to get to the corner that leads to Tia's wing, but today I saw another all-too-familiar sight ahead that forced me to remember that I'm not the only one suffering here. Just past the junction, the forlorn figure of Morena Lessen was standing in a doorway, staring blankly into the room beyond. She didn't hear me coming until the last moment, jumped, and then looked sheepishly towards me.

'Any change?' I said.

Morena shook her head but didn't speak.

In the room beyond was a single bed tended by a nurse, on which lay the comatose figure of Jason Parr. There had been no sign of conscious thought from him since being rescued from the control of Cronos. Occasionally, Jason opened his eyes, but his gaze had no focus, staring uncomprehendingly at the ceiling. Given the lack of any change in his condition, I was sure he was gone.

I can't say I felt a great deal of sympathy. That was probably unfair to Jason, but in my defence, I'd only known him as a homicidal maniac bent on the downfall of civilisation. That sort of thing does tend to cloud your judgement.

I was more worried about Morena Lessen. A year earlier, just before Jason had been subverted by Cronos, she'd rejected Jason's advances. The next time she'd seen him, he murdered her new love, Jon Black, right in front of her eyes, apparently out of spite. Had that spite been all Cronos's doing, or was it born from one of Jason's dormant memories?

I can't imagine how she felt, what thoughts must be going through her mind, but I was sure of one thing. It wasn't healthy for her to spend so much time staring at Jason. Dr Stait agreed and had instructed the other doctors and nurses to encourage her to leave after a few minutes. I'm sure Morena wouldn't do anything silly, like try to enact some sort of revenge – not that I'd blame her – but none of us wanted to take the chance. I guess it was my turn to steer her away.

'Seeing Dave again soon?' I said.

'Mmm?' said Morena, snapping out of her trance. 'Sorry. Yes, he's coming up here this morning.'

While things were getting reorganised, Brenda had temporarily given Morena responsibility for Jon Black's old department as well as her own, liaising with my former Ministry. She was the right person for the job, but I'm convinced Brenda primarily did it to keep her busy to take her mind off things.

Brenda had also had a quiet word with the new Minister of Information, who'd agreed to let my former colleague and sparring partner, Dave Elkington, smooth things from that end. Dave seemed to work as effectively with Morena as Jon Black, so that made perfect sense. Unfortunately it meant he was around the corridors of the Muffler's Ministry all too often now. The bastard.

'I'll stay in with Tia this morning then,' I said. 'Don't want to accidentally bump into him.'

That seemed to break the spell. Morena somehow managed to chuckle and let out a sigh at the same time.

'What is it with you two?' she said. 'You could try being nice to each other, you know?'

'He'd only get suspicious if I did,' I said.

'Try it,' she said. 'You might be surprised.'

'Oh fine. Say hi from me.'

'I will,' she said. 'Is that it?'

'Tell him he's a bastard.'

Well, at least the slap that hit my arm was playful. I think.

'I guess I'd better be off,' said Morena. 'I'll pass your message on, but I'm pretty sure that Dave will say you're a bastard too.'

'See, you're getting the hang of our friendship now,' I said.

'So you admit you're friends?'

'Damn.'

We both grinned, and Morena turned and left. Mission accomplished.

I made my way to Tia's room near the edge of the medical wards. She didn't need much ongoing care from the doctors as there was little to be done now other than wait, so it made sense to be a bit off the beaten track. To be honest, Dr Stait was well within his rights to say that Tia wasn't his responsibility, but he'd never quibbled for a moment. My respect and admiration for the taciturn man had grown day by day. With his staff, he'd lifted most of the logistical burden, leaving me and Tia's father, Leo Tobin, to find ways of caring for her.

The R&D divisions had been a great help too, especially Bernice Lee. She'd built a bespoke metal tray that fitted perfectly atop one of the hospital beds with its mattress removed, with small supports to keep Tia's stone cocoon stable. The tray was filled with nutrient fluid with which we regularly basted the stony surface to keep it as wet as possible. Despite the stone appearing shiny and non-porous, the nutrient fluid level went down rapidly, too fast than through natural evaporation. That had to be a good sign. Delphi must be taking in sustenance and hopefully using that to heal Tia. It was the best explanation we had, and I was grasping it.

Bernice visited most days to bring along a new supply of nutrient fluid, and if she couldn't make it, her wife and fellow R&D head, Jemima Sheik, did the honours. The couple both felt guilty as it could have been them stuck in the cocoon if events had turned out differently, but I know they'd both be here helping out anyway. That's who they are.

Leo Tobin was the only one who was a bit cold towards me, but that's understandable. To be honest, if I'd been in his position, I'd never have spoken to me again. If Tia hadn't met me, they'd both be back in Gooseport safely running the pub together.

Despite everything, we'd co-operated relatively amicably in taking turns being here with Tia. Leo had agreed to stay at the Ministry until we knew what was happening with her, keeping busy helping out in the canteen and bar, lightening the burden from Brenda now her position as the Minister was public knowledge.

'Good morning, Tia,' I said as I entered the room. 'How are you today?'

Dr Stait had suggested talking to Tia as a way to keep her connected to the outside world. We had no idea whether she could hear anything, but it wouldn't do any harm and might be doing good. Anyway, I'm sure it was to help me as much as her. It certainly helped pass the time while sitting alone in the room.

"Alone?" said Pythia.

"You know what I mean," I said.

I hope you've remembered that wherever I use double quotes, that's a mental conversation I'm having with Pythia. You remember Pythia, my furry snake familiar wrapped invisibly around my neck? I'm not allowed to forget her, so why should you?

"I love you too," said Pythia.

Actually, I'm not sure I'd have got through this without Pythia's constant, if grumpy support, but don't tell her I said that.

"You know I can hear what you think?" said Pythia.

"Shush."

As I did whenever I entered the room, I rubbed my hand gently across the surface of the cocoon.

'You're feeling a little dry, my love,' I said.

I'm hoping my regular confessions of how I feel about her are seeping through the pores and into Tia's brain. I mean, it's not like I didn't tell her beforehand, but it was usually at a totally inappropriate moment. I guess I'm doing it again, and I can imagine Tia rolling her eyes whenever I tell her I love her, but I don't care. I need to say it.

I picked up the ladle hung to the metal tray, scooped up some nutrient fluid, and drizzled it along the top before caressing it into the surface. It's pretty relaxing and therapeutic. Before long, the stone was fully covered, other than a small patch at one end.

'Let's have a look at your colour chart,' I said. 'See how things are progressing.'

Dr Stait had suspected that there was something about Tia's cocoon that was changing, and set out to prove it without mentioning it to anyone. He brought in his paint palette – it turns out he's a talented portrait artist in his spare time – and did his best to match the colour of Tia's stone, painting a small square on one end. He did the same the next day and every day since.

I'm not sure I'd have spotted it on my own, but there was his strip of brown squares for all to see, getting a little lighter every day. That's why I'm sure we're getting close to the final act of Tia's recovery. It's the only time in my life that a light shade of beige has genuinely excited me.

It's not the only change of note. Although it's hard to see with the lights on, a gentle glow radiates from the cocoon now. I'm not entirely sure, but I reckon it's getting brighter every day – an indication that there's something alive in there. I only hope it's Tia.

There's only one piece of evidence that gave me cause for concern, and the next person who walked through the door was a constant reminder: Ashley Carter, accompanied by Colin Head.

'How's the patient?' said Colin.

'She's been a bit cold with me today,' I said. 'Hasn't said a word.'

'Stony silence, eh?' he said, breaking out his familiar grin.

Ashley shook her head in despair at us, but I could see a small involuntary smile curl the corners of her mouth.

'You here for a check-up?' I said to her.

Dr Stait had only let Ashley leave his facility after her ordeal on the condition she came back regularly for check-ups. Unsurprisingly, being possessed by Cronos had changed her. She was more reticent, more subdued, although there were signs of her playful sense of humour starting to re-emerge in recent days.

'I've just seen him,' said Ashley.

'She's been discharged,' said Colin. 'No need to come back again, on the promise that I keep an eye on her and let him know if I have any concerns.' He took hold of her hand and squeezed it. 'That won't be a problem.'

Colin had been brilliant, caring for Ashley, helping her recover from the experience. He made no attempt to conceal how he felt about her, and increasingly, Ashley made it clear she reciprocated his feelings. It was great to see, they made a perfect couple – and equally important, it would make it easier for my relationship with Tia, assuming she's still forgiven me. Having two couples breaking the code of conduct that forbade relationships between members of the same division would provide some cover.

'That's brilliant,' I said.

'Tell me about it,' said Colin. 'The clincher was that her new familiar gave Ashley a deep scan and confirmed there's no trace of Cronos's influence remaining. Not that I thought there was. I know her too well for that.'

'I wonder why Jason is so different?' I said.

'He'd been more deeply taken over than the rest of us,' said Ashley. 'I'm not sure they were distinct anymore.'

'Would Cronos have done that to the rest of you?'

'Definitely. Jason said that once we– they'd taken over Portsea, there would be a period of consolidation. That would have...'

Ashley trailed off, not wanting to complete the thought. She quickly caught herself before a distracted frown crossed her face.

'Sorry, I have to go,' she said. 'Delphi just reminded me that it's time for my meeting with Brenda and Bristow.'

'Anything exciting?' I said.

Ashley just shrugged.

'It's not about...' I said.

I nodded towards their hands, still clasped together.

'It'd better not be,' said Colin.

'I'm sure it's not,' said Ashley. 'They'd have invited you along if it was.'

With that, they were gone. This was my life now, long spells alone talking with Tia and Pythia, interspersed with brief moments of the outside world impinging upon my vigil.

Delphi.

That was my main nagging cause for concern. Ashley's original familiar had died after its corruption by Cronos, and she'd been given a new one as soon as she was up to it. It had told her that its name was Delphi – the same name as Tia's. That had to mean that Tia's familiar was dead, as no two familiars ever had the same name. Yet we'd been working on the assumption that Tia's Delphi was in the cocoon, helping to heal her. If that wasn't true...

I didn't want to think about it, but Pythia had an idea that made enough sense for me to accept. The Oracle had said she couldn't tell Tia's condition inside the cocoon. Maybe whatever method was used to ensure familiar names were unique couldn't detect Delphi inside there either, so assumed he was dead.

It's a good enough theory for me.

I was alone for quite a while after Ashley and Colin's visit – yes, I know, Pythia – and it was only towards the end of my stint that the next interruption came. Dr Stait appeared, all prepared for his daily task, carrying a paintbrush, his artist palette, and a selection of paints. With a silent nod of acknowledgement, he made his way across to the end of Tia's cocoon.

Meticulously, he set about mixing today's matching colour, dabbing a test next to the other squares, frowning, adjusting the shade, trying again over and over. I kept quiet. It was fascinating to engage him on his art – indeed, it's only when he discusses his painting that his professional demeanour breaks and the person inside starts to shine – but I didn't want to distract him. I could see from his expression that he'd found something.

'Interesting...' he said after his latest attempt. 'That's new.'

That perked me up. I'd been feeling dozy when he'd arrived, but if there was a change, that meant... something.

'What?' I said.

'Every day, it's been easy to make the match,' he said. 'I just start off with ochre and add a bit more white each day. Until today.'

He drifted off, lost in thought as he tried something different. On the third attempt, he nodded in satisfaction.

'That's better,' he said. 'Needed a touch of yellow.'

'So what does that mean?' I said.

'Not sure. I wonder...'



## The Muffler's Mission

He mumbled under his breath, and the lights in the ceiling dimmed. As we'd seen before, a dim glow came from the cocoon itself, not discernable with the light on. I'd taken it as a sign of life from within, the luminous glow of my radiant Tia.

Today, it looked slightly brighter with a definite golden tint, or was that just my overactive, over-optimistic imagination?

'That confirms it for me,' he said. 'We're entering a new phase.'

'You were expecting this?' I said.

'I spotted something else a couple of nights ago,' he said. 'Here, let me show you.'

He walked across to a cupboard, opened it, and took out a contraption I'd not seen before. It looked like something Bernice might have jury-rigged for him: two long strips of wood set at right angles, with one sliding over the other, held in place by a finger screw.

He took it to Tia and placed the end of the longest leg into the base of her tray. The leg expanded to a large square foot at its bottom, ensuring it was held upright. He twisted it until the arm was directly over Tia's cocoon.

Unusually for the undemonstrative man, Dr Stait widened his eyes and raised his eyebrows.

'Well, well,' he said, putting his fingers between the arm and the cocoon.

'What's up?' I said.

'I adjusted this to fit exactly last night,' he said. 'The cocoon must be a centimetre and a half smaller now.'

'It's shrinking?' I said.

'And it's getting faster,' he said. 'A couple of days ago, it was about a millimetre smaller. Yesterday it was about half a centimetre.'

'What does that mean?' I said, dumbly refusing to accept the possibility that we might nearly be there.

'I can only imagine we're nearing the endgame,' he said.

He must have seen the look of worry on my face.

'This is a good sign,' he said. 'It proves things are progressing. I'm sure everything is going to be fine.'

It was rare for him to make such a positive pronouncement, but I still wasn't sure whether he was just telling me what I needed to hear.

'What can I do?' I said.

'Leave me to it,' he said. 'I'm going to monitor her constantly now and get my team in here to coordinate things. You'll only get in our way.'

'But I want to be here,' I said. 'I need to be here to see it, whatever...'

'Don't worry, I think we'll have plenty of warning,' he said. 'I'll send someone to get both you and Leo. He'll want to be here too.'

'True,' I said, feeling selfish. 'I'll be in my room all night. Well, other than for dinner around six, and maybe a drink in the bar afterwards.'

'Don't worry, we'll find you. Now go!'

I went, full of hope.

## Chapter 2 – Consummation

I didn't feel like going to the bar after my meal, but Ashley and Colin insisted. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

Actually, all I wanted to do was go to bed, wake up the following day, and see how things had progressed with Tia. I tried to extrapolate the shrinkage rate from what Dr Stait had told me, but I wasn't sure his figures were accurate enough to make any conclusions. All I knew was that it felt close, and it was all I could think about.

I told Leo the news as he served our drinks. He appeared distracted whenever I glanced across to him after that, and I'm sure I looked the same. The world was happening all around us, but neither of us felt part of it.

I was only half-listening to Ashley and Colin talking when I saw the three surviving members of The Clique – the old-timers in Bristow's division – walk into the bar. I nodded towards them, but all I received were glowers back.

'What's up with them?' I whispered. 'They've been fine with me since... since Cronos.'

'No idea,' said Colin. 'Maybe Bristow upset them. They were all in a meeting with him earlier.'

'Oh yes,' I said. 'What was your meeting about, Ashley?'

Ashley looked uncomfortable.

'She won't tell me,' said Colin.

'Sorry,' said Ashley. 'They asked me not to say anything, not until everything's certain.'

'What's going on?' I said. I'd been ignoring most of the reorganisation rumours swirling around, but this felt closer to home. 'Sounds like Colin and I are the only ones who haven't been called to see him. Should we be worried?'

'No, definitely not,' said Ashley. 'Look, I can't say anything more, but you'll both be fine. As will Tia when she's back. If she wants it, the job's still hers.'

I'd forgotten that technically Tia had only been a temporary replacement for Ashley while she was under Cronos's control, so that was good news. If Tia didn't have a job here, then I'd be leaving too, especially after what she'd done for everyone.

'What happens if Jason recovers?' said Colin.

'Don't worry, he'll have a job too,' said Ashley. 'I think it's a moot point though. I can't see him ever recovering. They're keeping his body alive, but the Jason we knew has gone.'

I nodded solemnly but didn't feel any particular sense of loss. It was different for them. They'd known Jason beforehand.

'I saw Morena in with Jason again earlier,' I said. 'I hope she's going to be OK.'

'I think so,' said Ashley. She'd described Morena as being like an older sister while growing up living in the Ministry. 'Honestly, she's coping better than I would, given what she's been through. She's throwing herself into her work most of the time. Your mate Dave's been a great help too – she trusts him, which she doesn't do easily these days.'

Why was it that everyone seemed to find Dave a different person to me?

Ashley leaned forward and lowered her voice.

'I can tell you one bit of gossip if you promise not to tell anyone.'

'Go on,' said Colin.

'Morena's going to stay running the unified Liaison division. Brenda's making the amalgamation with Jon's old division permanent.'

'That's going to keep her busy,' I said. 'Hopefully it'll be easier liaising with XD now Dad's not there making life difficult with his prejudices.'

He hated familiars, and I'd recently learnt why. That was something I hadn't told anyone yet. It was too personal.

'I think that's the hope,' said Ashley. 'But she won't be doing it alone. XD's agreed to make things easier by promoting Dave Elkington to handle things at that end. It seems to have worked well for the last couple of weeks, so it's sensible to make that permanent too.'

Courtney Godel, my old boss when I worked there, had been promoted to take over from my Dad as XD, which was a decent choice. But another promotion for Dave already? The bastard.

Before I had a chance to remonstrate, I heard someone call my name. It was Leo, waving at me from across the room. Brenda was making her way behind the bar.

'C'mon boy,' said Leo. 'The doc wants to see us. Something's happening.'

'Run,' said Brenda. 'He says things are moving rapidly.'

I ran, but not too fast as I matched my pace to Leo's. To be fair, he was pretty quick for a man of his age but was panting by the time we arrived.

It was obvious why we'd been called. The cocoon was only about two-thirds of the height when I left and was no longer even in shape. There were undulations along its surface, narrowing significantly when it reached the head, and beginning to approximate the shape of a body. The shape of Tia.

Dr Stait and two nurses were fussing around the cocoon when we entered, listening through a stethoscope, taking its temperature, measuring its height.

'Come in, sit down out of the way,' said the doc. 'I thought you ought to be here – the shrinkage is accelerating.'

'How long with it be?' said Leo as we took our seats.

'Hard to say – minutes, probably. It's important that you're here. Tia will need familiar faces around her.'

I wasn't convinced it would be that long. I narrowed my eyes and stared at the top of the cocoon for confirmation. I was right, you could see it visibly shrinking now, and the glow was visible even with the lights on. It had taken on a rich orange tint that also seemed to be growing brighter still.

'It's getting hotter,' said one of the nurses after a minute.

Dr Stait checked with his stethoscope one last time, shrugged, and stepped back.

'Stand back now,' he said. 'There's nothing more we can do.'

He gestured to us, and we stood up and positioned ourselves to either side of where we assumed Tia's head would be. As we stared at the rapidly shrinking surface, it was definitely taking on Tia's form, the glow changing hue to remind me of Tia's tawny skin.

And then it stopped. It can't have been much more than a couple of centimetres bigger than Tia, but it hovered at that size, wavering slightly as if unsure what to do.

That was when my resolve vanished. My false façade of confidence that Tia was about to return began to crumble. My hands started to shake, and I was holding my breath. I exhaled with a sob.

Without any warning came a spectacularly ordinary low *pop*, and the cocoon was gone as if it had never existed. Lying on the bed in its place was the glowing form of Tia Tobin.

I'm not being metaphorical here. Tia's skin was glowing more brightly than the cocoon as if she'd been freshly removed from a fire. It gradually faded, which was a pity as it had been a good look for her. She was wearing the same clothes as the day she'd gone to the island, implausibly clean and undamaged.

Tia opened her eyes.

'Well, hello there,' she said. 'Fancy meeting you here.'

Her bravado was belied by a wavering uncertainty in her voice. I decided to play along.

'Hey, no nicking my chat-up lines!'

Leo leant over his daughter, clearly unimpressed by our conversation.

'How are you feeling, my dear?' he said.

'I'm fine, Dad,' said Tia. 'A bit woozy.'

She stretched and winced.

'Can I get out of this thing?' she said. 'It's not exactly comfortable.'

Now that the cocoon had vanished, she was lying directly on the metal tray, damp with nutrient fluid. The doc had been sensible and kept the liquid level low as the end approached, but it can't have been pleasant.

The two nurses stepped forward and helped lift her into the chair beside the bed. Dr Stait bustled around her, listening everywhere with his stethoscope.

'What was it like in there?' I said.

'I don't remember most of it,' she said. 'Delphi sedated me until the worst of my injuries started to heal. I was only semi-conscious after that. It's all a bit hazy.'

'Is Delphi all right?' I said.

Tia shook her head slowly but didn't appear upset.

'No, Delphi's gone. Well, not gone. It's... complicated.'

Well, that didn't exactly clarify anything. Tia seemed to be drifting in and out of focus, unsurprising given what she'd been through.

'Do you remember what happened?' I said. Tia blinked a couple of times. 'The Oracle told us that you set off the explosives.'

She nodded, then grimaced.

'I remember,' she said. 'There was nothing else I could do when Cronos took me over. It was horrible.'

'I bet,' I said, mainly to give her time to collect her thoughts.

She shuddered.

'I wasn't expecting to survive. I didn't want to, not like that, but Cronos's hold gave way as his systems were destroyed. Delphi managed to put up a shield to protect himself from the worst but couldn't do much for me in that moment, other than make sure I didn't feel anything.'

'How did you survive?' said Leo.

'You can thank the Oracle for that,' said Tia. 'She told Delphi what to do, then helped him put up a barrier to protect us from the falling rocks and create the cocoon. But that meant we were cut off.'

'What happened to Delphi then?' I said. 'You said he was gone.'

'He sacrificed himself to save me,' said Tia. 'While I was unconscious, he followed the Oracle's instructions on how to restore me from my injuries. Delphi gave up his... his essence to make it work. He was dead by the time I was conscious again, but he's not entirely gone.'

'How do you mean?' I said.

'It's hard to describe,' said Tia. 'It's as if he's part of me still. I know what he knew. I knew what he'd done, knew how to complete my recovery. I can't hear him, but it feels as if he's with me still.'

'I see,' I said, although that wasn't exactly true. 'Don't worry. Once you're ready, we'll get you a new familiar.'

'I don't think that will be necessary,' said Tia. 'Let me...'

She grimaced with effort, but I suddenly felt lighter. My feet lifted from the ground. This must have been how my Dad felt whenever I lifted him up to the roof.

'Yup,' she said. 'My telekinesis still works.'

She lowered me to the ground, although I dropped the last few centimetres.

'Sorry,' she said, slumping back into her chair. 'That was more tiring than I expected.'

'No problem,' I said, slightly disconcerted by what I'd seen. Tia's telekinesis seemed as powerful as mine, even without a familiar. Would her other abilities be as strong?

"Don't get any ideas," said Pythia. "You still need me."

"Not going to sacrifice yourself and give me your powers then?" I said.

"Don't push your luck."

"I'd miss your nagging anyway," I said.

"Quite right," said Pythia.

Dr Stait interjected before I had a chance to say anything else.

'Tia needs to rest now,' he said. 'And we need to make sure she's recovered. You can come back and see her later.'

Leo started to object, but Tia set him straight.

'He's right, Dad,' she said. 'I'm still knackered. Give me a chance to rest, and come back in the morning. I'm not going anywhere now. Don't worry, I'm fine.'

I could see how tired she was, but it didn't matter now. She was back. After saying our goodbyes, I hurried back to the bar to let everyone know the news, elated but exhausted by the release of the unacknowledged tension that had been part of my life for so long.

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By the following afternoon, Tia was fed up with all the tests, especially as they showed her to be in perfect health, if a little weak. She'd also received a constant stream of visitors. Brenda was amongst the first, immediately setting Tia's mind at ease about her future, and Tia emphatically confirmed that she wanted to stay at the Ministry. Phew.

Although everyone was lovely and supportive, it was obvious Tia needed time to herself so she could relax. I offered to leave, but Tia insisted that I stayed, along with her Dad.

Finally, when Dr Stait entered again, Tia snapped.

'Look, is there any reason why I have to stay here now?'

Dr Stait took his time to respond as calmly as ever.

'I'm afraid this is all new to us. We can't be sure what the long-term side effects will be.'

'Well I'm not staying here for the long term,' said Tia. 'I can come back every day for a check-up if you like.'

'You're still weak though.'

'The best way for me to get my strength back is to get on with my life.'

Dr Stait considered that for a few moments.

'I'm afraid it's too great a risk,' he said. 'You shouldn't be left alone yet. If you had a relapse, there would be nobody there to help.'

'I won't be alone,' said Tia. 'Rowan and Dad will look after me for now, won't you?'

We both readily agreed. She had no need to ask.

Dr Stait looked at her silently. Tia smiled sympathetically back.

'You can't think of another excuse, can you?' said Tia.

'Very well,' he said, showing no disappointment. 'As long as you'll both guarantee that Tia will never be left alone, day or night, until I give the all-clear, then I'm happy.'

And that was it. As soon as she'd eaten her evening meal, Tia was ready to leave. Even better, I was the one she was going home with.

It had been Tia's choice. Leo wasn't happy when she'd told him she was staying with me while recovering, but she explained that we both had a lot to discuss. She'd still see him every day.

Unsurprisingly, I was chuffed. Dr Stait gave me his instructions on what to look out for – although I'm sure he was over-worrying – and then we were off.

We took it slowly. Tia would never admit it, but I was convinced she was weaker than she was letting on. We'd only reached the end of the corridor before she paused for the first time.

'Did you say Jason was around here?' said Tia.

'In there,' I said, pointing to where I'd seen Morena earlier.

Tia approached the doorway and peered inside.

'I didn't really get a chance to see him properly before,' she said. 'It was a bit hectic when he attacked you in the bar and too dark on the island.'

She entered the room slowly and took the chair next to the bed, staring at Jason silently. His eyes were closed at the moment.

'There's been no sign of life from him, not since we killed his familiar,' I said.

She nodded, then shivered.

'I can't imagine what he went through,' said Tia. 'I was only briefly under Cronos's control, and that felt like an eternity. I could feel him eating away at me. A few more seconds and I'd have been lost too.'

'Do you think there's anything of him left?' I said.

'I doubt it,' she said. 'I could feel Cronos pushing me aside, trying to replace me. He's not like the Oracle, taking up a small space in our minds. He wants it all. He wants all of everyone.'

Tia would know better than anyone, and she was only confirming what Ashley had felt. It seemed as if the control of Ashley via her familiar was minor compared to what Tia and Jason had endured, directly from Cronos's systems.

'There's a lot of disquiet now people know about the Oracle, but I'm sure everyone would prefer her to Cronos,' I said. I let out an involuntary snort at my own words. 'Well, maybe not my Dad.'

'What do you mean?' said Tia.

'Oh, nothing really,' I said. 'I saw my Dad while you were recovering and discovered where his hatred of familiars and the Oracle comes from. Something I never knew.'

'What?'

'When he was younger, before I was born, he tried to become a Muffler but was rejected. He doesn't like rejection.'

'Is that all?' said Tia. 'That's quite a grudge to bear.'

'It's more complicated than that,' I said. 'If Dad had a familiar, he might have spotted Mum's cancer earlier, might even have been able to save her himself. I think he feels guilty but blames that guilt on the Ministry and the Oracle in particular.'

'It's not the Oracle's fault he was rejected,' said Tia.

'Actually, it is, partly,' I said. 'I looked it up in the records when I got back from seeing him. Turns out the familiar rejected him – hence his disgust towards them and the Oracle.'

'I see,' said Tia. 'Poor man.'

She was more understanding than me. I wanted nothing more to do with him.

We made our way back to Tia's room, stopping regularly on lightweight pretexts to rest. I never questioned why we stopped, and Tia never volunteered, but she knew that I knew. Eventually, we arrived at her door and entered.

Tia collapsed straight onto her bed, finally admitting her exhaustion.

'Guess it'll take me a few days to get my strength back,' she said.

I sat on the edge of the bed beside her and took her hand.

'There's no hurry,' I said. 'Just do a bit more each day, and you'll be back to normal in no time.'

She grimaced unexpectedly at that.

'I'll need your help to practise my magic too, find out what its limits are,' she said. 'It feels different now. You know, without Delphi.'

That was a good point. We'd need to go through everything together, although her telekinesis seemed strong already, even in her weakened state.

'Can you speak to the Oracle directly yourself, like a familiar?' I said.

## The Muffler's Mission

'I'm not sure. I think so. I can feel how to do it, but I can also feel something telling me I shouldn't unless it's urgent.' She shook her head. 'It's weird. It's almost as if Delphi is there, speaking to me, without using words. Sorry, that makes no sense.'

'It's fine,' I said. 'I guess it shows that Delphi is part of you now.'

'It's comforting,' said Tia. She cocked her head and looked at me oddly, as if uncertain how to say something. 'Did you mean what you said to me?'

'When?'

'When I was still inside that thing.'

'You could hear me?' I said.

I was never sure, and we hadn't discussed it since she'd emerged.

'At the end,' she said. 'Maybe the last couple of days. Think I was drifting in and out, but there was one thing you kept telling me. Did you mean it?'

'That I love you?' She nodded. 'With all my heart. I know I've a lot to make up for, but let me prove myself.'

She took a deep breath.

'I'm going to put that to the test,' she said. 'I need to know.'

'Go on.'

'There's one bit of my magic I'm sure is working well,' said Tia. 'My glamour. The Oracle made sure Delphi could do it in that brief moment before... you know.'

'Your glamour?' I said, missing the obvious.

'Did you really think Delphi managed to repair my clothes in the cocoon as well as my body?' said Tia. 'There was no chance. They were burnt before the shield went up.'

'So those clothes were just a glamour?' I said. 'And a glamour that none of us could penetrate. That's impressive.'

Glamours only usually worked on those without familiars. This was new, but I was still missing something.

'Not just my clothes,' she said, holding up her hands. 'Prepare yourself.'

The perfect skin on the back of her hands puckered into angry red scars, undulating up her wrists until they disappeared under her sleeves. It was somehow unsurprising but a horrible shock at the same time.

'Does it still hurt?' I said, not knowing what else to say.

'Not now,' said Tia. 'Itches a bit.'

'That must have been so painful,' I said, knowing it wasn't the full story. 'Just your hands?'

Tia held my eyes and shook her head.

'Everywhere,' she whispered.

'Show me,' I said.

'Sure? There's no going back.'

'I'm sure.'

With a curt nod, her face slowly wrinkled into the same landscape of livid weals stretching from her neckline up and over her bald scalp. An uncertain smile formed on her cracked mouth.

'Well?' she said.



## The Muffler's Mission

I looked at her for a few more seconds before responding. It couldn't be a glib answer. Under all that damage, it was so clearly still Tia.

'You'll always be beautiful to me,' I said. I took her hands and squeezed them, trusting her word that it wouldn't be painful. 'Of course I still love you.'

'Right answer,' she said.

Tia shimmered briefly, and the glamour reappeared. I feigned shock and horror at her perfect appearance.

'Bastard,' she said.

'You sound just like Dave.'

I wasn't sure whether it was from relief or tiredness, but Tia suddenly looked dizzy.

'Think I need to have a snooze,' she said. 'Will you stay with me?'

'Of course,' I said.

Tia lay down, facing away from me. I spooned behind her, with my arm reaching over and grasping her hand. After a couple of minutes, her breathing slowed. Just as I thought she'd fallen asleep, she mumbled something under her breath.

'What was that?' I said gently.

'I said, I love you too.'

I squeezed her, having no intention of ever letting go again.

## Chapter 3 – Excursion

I've told you before. You get me warts and all in these journals, so if I'm feeling all mushy and romantic, that's what you'll get.

Oh fine, have it your way. I think everything is about to change anyway – our moments of seclusion and recuperation will soon be things of the past. Life goes on, and we need to be part of it.

It feels so good to be able to say *we* at last. I've made some awful mistakes in the past. Tia had every right never to forgive me for them, but life-changing events tend to put what's important into focus. I'm delighted with where that leaves us: together, with the Mufflers as our extended family.

We spent three days together helping Tia recuperate, going on long meandering walks around the castle, progressing to gentle jogs by the final day. Her strength was returning quickly, and she ate voraciously.

We popped in and said hello to everyone, but in small numbers only. Tia didn't feel up to the crowded bar yet. We practised her magic for hours up on the castle roof, which made her eat even more. Hour by hour, she got closer to her old self.

There were differences.

Even without her stupendous glamour, the rest of Tia's magic was at least as strong as before, although there was often a bit of a delay as if she struggled to kick it into life. She could lift a similar weight to me with her telekinesis once she got going. She also assured me her empathy was working fine, although her familiar-free Dad had to be her main test subject for that, seeing as the rest of us were immune.

There was one noticeable exception. Tia could snap a shield up in an instant – an order of magnitude faster than I could get Pythia to do it, and faster than Pythia could manage of her own volition.

"I didn't know it was a competition," said Pythia. "Give me another chance."

"Shush."

The other main difference wasn't magical – so obvious to me, although I'm not sure others would notice so readily. Tia held herself taut, her eyes flicking from side to side when she thought I wasn't looking. Whenever there was an unexpected noise or movement, she jumped, almost imperceptibly. She was on edge.

It was unsurprising given what she'd been through, but that wasn't going to stop me from worrying. I tried, in my usual unsubtle manner, to get her to open up about it, but she wasn't interested yet. She'd find her own way through.

We were walking past the lawn at the front of the castle where I'd first met Ashley and Colin a few weeks and a lifetime ago. The sound of a cricket mallet hitting a ball caused her to start.

'You OK?' I said.

'Stop asking that,' said Tia. 'I'll tell you if I'm not.'

'Sorry,' I said. 'Sure you don't want to talk about it?'

'Sure you don't want me to hit you with a mallet?'

That seemed like a cue to change the subject.

'Fancy a game of cricket?' I said. 'Ashley and Colin love it, although I think Ashley mainly likes hitting the ball at Colin.'

'I can see the pleasure in that right now,' said Tia. She frowned briefly. 'It's called croquet, not cricket.'

I stopped walking.

'Croquet?' I said. 'How do you know?'

'I'm not sure,' she said. 'The name just popped into my head. It's weird, like memories that aren't mine that I can call upon. Guess that's what it's like for familiars.'

"Is that right, Pythia?" I said.

"Yup," said Pythia. "I knew that too."

"Why didn't you tell us we had the wrong name? Or one of the other familiars?"

"It's not important," said Pythia. "Anyway, it's fun laughing at you all behind your backs. Tia's going to spoil that for us now."

I sighed. I should have known.

'Can we leave the game for another time?' said Tia. 'I fancy a walk into town.'

'Sounds a great idea,' I said.

It would be the first time she'd ventured out of the castle, with a decent trek back uphill afterwards. It sounded the perfect way to round off this phase of her recovery.

Brenda had asked to see us both late in the afternoon, so this might be our last chance for a trip out before our real lives started to impinge on the fun. I only hoped Brenda wasn't going to read the code of conduct back at us.

As we made our way down the hill towards the town, it was hard not to look at the flooded ruins out in the sea beyond Portsea harbour. Lurking somewhere in the middle was Cronos island, hosting the ruins of the systems that had sustained the remnant of Cronos – systems destroyed by Tia in the explosion. It was difficult to think of anything else.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

'Anywhere particular you want to go in town?' I said, as much of a distraction as anything. Tia didn't know Portsea that well yet.

'The harbour,' said Tia. 'That's where my boat should be still.'

I should have guessed. I'd told her that Bernice Lee and Jemima Sheik had sailed to the island in her boat on the Oracle's instruction and had recovered her cocoon. The boat had been her pride and joy. She never looked as happy as when she was sailing it.

'I know where they docked it,' I said. 'I'm sure it'll be fine.'

It had better be.

Luckily the route through town to the harbour took me well away from my Dad's house. I had no desire to accidentally bump into him, and for once, my wishes were granted.

Tia could read me as well as I could read her.

'Going to see your Dad again?' she said.

'No chance,' I said. 'Well, not until he gives me a reason for going.'

'Why did you see him last time?' said Tia. 'You know, while I was still in there.'

'He tricked me,' I said. 'He started being all reasonable and cooperative, helping Courtney to take over as XD. Turns out it was all a ruse to get me to go and talk to him.'

That was the last time I'd be naive enough to trust him. I'm still unsure why he did it, what his agenda was, but it ended badly. And yes, on the roof.

Tia took my hand and squeezed. We both knew the time would come, I couldn't avoid him around town forever, but I didn't want to face up to the prospect.

As soon as we approached the jetty, I could see Tia's boat moored safely in the same place I'd last seen it. It looked fine. Tia picked up the pace, and we soon reached it. A smile spread across her face as she studied her old friend with relief.

'Nobody came back to tidy it up then?' she said, looking at the tarpaulin that was abandoned at the base of the mast. 'Surprised Bert's not asked you to check his tarpaulin back into stores by now.'

She'd used it to cover the explosives on her way to the island, and Bernice and Jemima had used it to protect her cocoon on the final journey back.

'Too busy looking after you,' I said, feeling a little guilty that I hadn't come and cleaned her boat myself. Still, it seemed in good nick.

'Fancy a sail?' said Tia. 'We've hours before we have to see Brenda.'

I assumed this had been her plan all along. It would be just what she needed.

While Tia played with the sails, I rowed the boat towards the harbour entrance, but she insisted on taking over before long.

'It'll help me get my strength back,' said Tia.

Well, that was true, but the main reason was that she loved every part of the experience, even the back-breaking stuff. Before long, we were out of the harbour, under sail and heading out towards Wight Rocks, skirting along the eastern side of the Portsea ruins.

As she always did, Tia angled her face towards the sun, tilted her head back and closed her eyes. For the first time since her recovery, her taut posture relaxed, and she breathed slowly and deeply.

Tia was reborn.

I relaxed too. Not wanting to spoil the mood, I stayed quiet for several minutes. It was only when I realised Tia was so zoned out that she wasn't paying any attention to where we were heading that I needed to bring us back to reality.

'Um...' I said eloquently.

Tia blinked her eyes open. I nodded back over her shoulder.

'Shit,' said Tia, yanking sharply on the tiller.

We'd started angling towards the Portsea ruins; in fact, I'm pretty sure we were heading directly towards Cronos island itself. It was as if Tia was drawn to it like a magnet. It wasn't long before we were heading back past the ruins towards the channel between it and the Wight Rocks. Tia was visibly shaken.

'You OK?' I said.

She gave a slight nod.

'I don't want to go back there again.'

'Don't blame you,' I said.

I didn't want to see it either. Bernice and Jemima had described the scene of Tia's entombment to me, and that was more than enough.

We reverted to a peaceful silence as the boat cut through the waves and made rapid progress away from the shore. Tia manoeuvred us westward past the end of the ruins, remaining alert now.

'Do you mind if we pay a quick visit to Gooseport now we're out here?' said Tia. 'There's still loads of time before we have to see Brenda.'

I thought she'd seemed to be steering with a purpose. Gooseport had been her home until recently, and she'd been unceremoniously ripped away from it by my actions, admittedly in response to Cronos's attempt to take the village over. I wonder what had happened to the pub. I guessed we'd find out.

'Sure,' I said. 'I'd like to see it too.'

I'd nearly died there in the final throes of the battle against Jason and his controlled minions, only being saved by Tia's sacrifice out on the island. It would be good to see how the place had recovered.

It was odd how quickly your perspectives changed. Given how little anyone normally travels, the road trip from Portsea to Gooseport had seemed a big deal at first. Now after a couple more visits, it seemed nothing to pop back briefly, especially by the faster method of sailing rather than being bumped along in a cart. Travel broadens the horizons, I guess.

There was another thing that I hadn't really thought about before – yes, I know, just thinking about myself, as usual. Tia had spent her whole life living there in the pub. As much as she'd wanted to do something more with her life, recent events hadn't given her much choice about the matter. She'd grasped the chance and made the most of it, but there must be things about her old world she'd miss. All her possessions were still there, Leo's too.

'Anything you want to do while we're here?' I said, after picking up the oars to row us through the harbour.

I didn't want Tia to overdo it yet. We still had the journey back to worry about.

'Not really,' she said. 'I'd like to pop into the pub, make sure it's OK, and plan what stuff I need to take back to the Ministry.'

'Taking it with us now?'

She shook her head.

'No, I'll have to come back with Dad with a cart to collect what we need,' she said. 'Dad's already told the mayor we'll be giving up the pub, so they'll arrange someone else to take it over. They've given us a couple of weeks, but sure they'll be flexible if we can't make it.'

'It's a big upheaval for your Dad at his age,' I said. 'Is he sure about this?'

'Honestly, I think he's loving it,' said Tia. 'He's still working at a bar, helping out with the food, and is meeting a lot of new people. He gets on great with Brenda too. It's given him a new lease of life.'

'I'm pleased it's worked out for him,' I said. 'I think the main benefit though is that he can still see you all the time, despite you having started the new life you'd always wanted.'

'True,' she said. 'As long as Dad can see I'm happy, I know he'll always support me.'

'I'll do what I can to make that happen,' I said.

'You'd better, or Dad will be after you.'

That was indeed an added incentive to ensure we had as happy a future as possible, not that I needed it.

We docked the boat further away from the pub than where Tia had previously kept it, as that part of the jetty was closed off at the moment. It looked as if some idiot had destroyed part of the decking, and workmen were there repairing it. Some people are so irresponsible.

"A-hem," said Pythia, enunciating each syllable carefully.

"Shush."

Look, we all know it was me, back when we were trying to escape from Jason, but let's keep it between friends.

After climbing up the harbour wall steps, the end of the market square could be seen in the distance. It was teeming with activity, apparently back to how it was when I'd first visited here, and not the ghost town when Cronos's zombies had been roaming the streets. That was good. The world was returning to normal.

'Another time,' said Tia, seeing where I was looking. 'Not sure I could face the crowds right now. I'd get too many questions.'

'Yeah, I bet a lot of people don't know what's happened to you,' I said.

It wasn't something that we could easily answer questions about either. Some of the tale was general knowledge after the confrontation with the crowd in Portsea as we left for the final showdown with Cronos. Everyone also knew that the crisis had been averted, but Brenda had said that the Ministers were still deciding what parts of the fuller story would be made public.

We set off in the opposite direction towards the Malvista Inn, Tia's former home. Just before we got there, a horse and cart came clopping down the street towards us. The man driving it waved at Tia and slowed the cart to a halt.

'You're alive!' he said with obvious delight. 'I never thought we'd see you again. How's your Dad?'

'He's fine,' said Tia. 'We all are, thanks to your help.'

Tia gathered from my confused glance that I had no idea who he was or what she was talking about.

'Rowan, this is Bruce,' she said. 'He helped us escape after you were attacked in the pub.'

That would be why I didn't recognise him. I think being unconscious at the time is a decent enough excuse. I could vaguely remember the rattling of his cart down the street and the sound of horseshoes on cobbles, but not much else. We were out to sea before I fully regained consciousness.

'Thanks Bruce,' I said. 'You saved our lives.'

'You saved everyone's lives,' said Tia. 'If we hadn't got away, we'd all have lost.'

'You mean the battle here?' said a confused Bruce. 'How? Was it the same guy that attacked you?'

'Yes,' I said. He deserved to know what a significant role he'd played. 'After we escaped, we discovered who was controlling him and where they were based. Without that, it might have been too late for the Ministry to act.'

He paused for a few moments to let that sink in. I assumed everyone had heard the basic story of the threat from history by now, which seemed to be the case.

'You mean that creature that brought down the old world?' said Bruce.

'Yeah,' said Tia. 'His name was Cronos.' She grinned. 'I blew him up.'

'You...' started Bruce. 'How?'

It was probably time to draw a line under this before we gave too much away, at least until Brenda had announced it publicly.

'We both work for the Ministry now,' I said. 'While we were here with the main battle, Tia was part of the team that snuck back to destroy him. She was the one who set off the explosion.'

'Wow,' he said. He looked impressed at first, but suddenly it turned to suspicion. 'So you know about this Oracle then?'

That was a shock. One thing that Brenda had been determined to keep away from the public consciousness, at least until the time was right, was knowledge of the Oracle. It could too easily be misconstrued. Or equally, be correctly construed in a bad light, depending on your perspective.

'What's the Oracle?' I said.

'I was just making a delivery to the Golden Goose,' said Bruce. 'Everyone was talking about a story someone told them in the bar last night. About the Oracle, another thing from the old world who fought against this... Cronos, you called him? They said it was our secret President, even though it's not human. That it lives in our heads or something. Is that true?'

What should I say? We had a major problem on our hands if the story had got out in an uncontrolled fashion.

'That sounds weird,' I said.

'Weird?' he said. 'It's frightening. This Oracle must be controlling us, just like that Cronos.'

'Nothing's as bad as Cronos,' snapped Tia. She took a deep breath and smiled sweetly at Bruce. 'Tell you what, I'll ask when we get back. Dad and I are coming back to pick up our stuff in a few days, so I'll let you know what I find out then. OK?'

'I guess,' said Bruce.

'Don't believe everything you hear in pubs,' I said, as lightly as I could. 'There are some great storytellers around who'll make up any old story to get a free drink.'

He didn't seem convinced, but with that, we took our leave.

'That was worrying,' I said. 'Someone's been gossiping.'

'Brenda's not going to be happy,' said Tia.

'Guess we ought to go back and let her and Bristow know,' I said. 'At least we'll be seeing them this afternoon anyway.'

'Yeah,' said Tia. 'Just give me ten minutes at home, then we can head straight back.'

## The Muffler's Mission

The front door of the Malvista Inn had been repaired from the damage inflicted by Dave Elkington's head, but Tia's key still worked. I waited in the bar while Tia bustled around upstairs and out back. She came back carrying a couple of bags and looking satisfied.

'Got everything you want?' I said.

'Didn't want much,' said Tia. She held up one of the bags. 'Just a few mementoes and personal things for now. I wanted to take Dad back his photo of Mum that he keeps on his bedside cabinet.'

'That's nice.'

'And all this stuff,' she said, opening the other bag.

It was full of the gadgets she'd found on the island that had been stored in a drawer in the office. That had been the purpose of my mission here in the first place. I'd completely forgotten about them.

'You aiming for brownie points?' I said.

'Got to make an impression while I'm new in the job,' she said.

'I think killing Cronos made quite an impression,' I said.

Her expression turned to a frown. All the time she could forget about it, the old Tia emerged, but those memories must be hard to bear.

'Let's go,' she said.