

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

I studied each snowflake in complete captivation. Each snowflake was unique, with its own special pattern. Those patterns were like each snowflake's own personality. I believed that the snowflakes felt as much as I did and that, even throughout the duration of their short lives, they achieved great joy as they soared through the air, and boundless sorrow when their journeys came to an end once they fell to the ground, never to fly again until they were reborn next winter.

I had loved winter ever since I was little. The snowflakes and all the white powder on the ground had always mesmerized and enchanted me, especially when the sun shined not enough to melt it but just enough to make it shimmer. I would play outside until I was confident that I had contracted frostbite, at which point I would finally retreat inside and take off my boots and double pairs of socks to find all ten of my tiny toes were still properly colored and intact. Every Ground Hog Day I was restless to discover whether the ground hog had seen its shadow or not, and when it did I would dance around the house performing every dance move I could think of, but when it didn't I would yell at the television, accusing them of misinforming the public, until my parents would remind me that Ground Hog Day was just another superstition. They never reminded me of this when the ground hog saw its shadow.

Whenever I felt down, the wonder outside would give me hope. But something always felt off about my life. Something was misplaced. Simply put, something was wrong. And it was during those frosty days that this certain feeling was most distinct. Other times as long as I paid it no mind it would eventually ease away and everything would go back to the way it was, but when things were most blissful and I didn't have any certain thing to occupy my mind, it crept its way back in and refused to be ignored.

I didn't understand this. I had a good life. I had a loving family, plenty of decent and even some of the occasional exceptional friends, and my happy memories outnumbered the bad. But it didn't matter how hard I concentrated on my good fortune; that feeling would always tug at me. Weddings and parties had been ruined by the dreaded interruption of its ominous presence. It stalked me in times like those, an invisible reminder of something I couldn't find.

I remembered when I had gone to my Aunt Macy's wedding a few years ago. She was one of, if not my most, favorite aunt. When Mom had told me about it one Monday morning, I had been so excited I couldn't focus on anything at school. When the time finally came to go to the wedding, I had made sure that I clapped louder than anyone else once the pastor announced they were officially Mr. and Mrs. But afterward, when everyone had been eating, talking, and laughing about the challenges of marriage, that feeling had spoiled everything. I had gone to the bathroom to try and calm myself down, and when I finally came out, it had nearly been time to go.

I called it the Presence, but had never mentioned it to anyone else.

On one particular winter day, when the Presence had become overwhelming, I went on a walk over to my friend Arlo's house.

Arlo was the most exceptional out of all my exceptional friends. True to rumor, he could be a party pooper, but he could also be the life of the party if excited by something. Arlo wasn't

excited by normal things. He buried himself into books of both fiction and nonfiction and kept his grades secret from everyone else. He had even gone to such an extreme measure as to request that his teachers didn't give him his paper until after class when everyone was gone. I took this to mean one of two things: either Arlo was an idiot, or a genius. I doubted he was an idiot, anyone who spent as much time in books as he did was very likely to be quite the opposite, but if so, why did he make this much effort to hide his grades?

My curiosity was unquenchable. No matter how much it was given it always wanted more. So I had once questioned Arlo about his academics. He had looked up at me from the book he was reading, raised an eyebrow that accented the "Are you serious?" expression on his face, and went back to reading. It didn't matter though, I knew that he had to be a genius in hiding, like Batman without his riches but still retaining his secret identity.

I had thought about telling him about the Presence, but I had never confided in him about something so odd yet meaningful to me before. As I approached his house my fear was overtaking my courage and I thought it best to not mention it. I wouldn't risk complicating my finest friendship over some stupid nonexistent thing of my imagination.

I shook my head sternly before ringing the doorbell. I wanted to distract myself from the Presence; I needed to pull myself together. It was such a strange feeling, always fretting over it. Arlo was usually the one who worried about things, while I dove in headfirst. Arlo practically couldn't live without all his complex charts and plans. He had had six charts plastered to his closet walls the last time I had seen him; I wondered if he had added more. I didn't understand any of them, of course, and he refused to explain any of them. Didn't he know he could trust me? He was so paranoid sometimes.

The door slid open and I was greeted by Mrs. Milton's beaming smile.

"Aria, I was just thinking about you!"

Her eyebrows drew together and she looked outside, left and right.

"Did you walk over here? You shouldn't walk in such bitter weather! The temperature has been dropping rapidly today and you could have caught something."

The sincere concern in her eyes and voice made me feel guilty for making her worry.

"Hurry up and get inside," she said, putting a hand behind my back to usher me in.

My shoes were soaked. I hadn't been able to find my winter boots, so I had just put on a pair and gone outside. I hadn't wanted to miss out on any of the snow because of a trivial pair of lost boots. Mrs. Milton noticed this and closed her eyes for a moment. She shook her head carefully, like she was further assessing the situation with each motion, and then came to a stop. I waited for her to say something, but she didn't utter a word.

I took off my drenched moccasins and the first layer of my socks which had been exposed to some wetness, shook off my fur coat and carefully hung it on the coatrack, and tugged off my hat placing it on the rack as well.

I looked up at Mrs. Milton innocently and she raised an eyebrow. Until then I hadn't realized how much Arlo looked like her when he did that. Although he executed it in a sassier manner more than a reproving one.

She sighed, and her mouth squirmed a bit as if she were restraining a smile.

"Arlo is in his room, but I think he's in the middle of something so open the door slowly. You know how he gets when he's working on one of his projects."

We both nodded in agreement. Indeed I did.

I cautiously crept up the stairs and knocked lightly when I reached his door.

"Who is it?"

"Aria."

I heard rustling and, even though it was quiet, it sounded rushed. After I heard him shut a couple drawers and a few clanking noises, he opened the door and stared at me.

"Hello," he said dryly.

Arlo wasn't exactly the most animated person I'd ever met, but he was usually at least *glad* to see me. But today he seemed like it wouldn't have made a difference whether or not I was there. That stung a bit. My most exceptional friend didn't show he was happy to see me. Was he just used to me now and no longer saw my visits as special occasions but an everyday sort of thing? Was something bothering him? Had I done something to make him act this way?

"Um, hi."

I shifted awkwardly.

"You may come in," he said.

I walked inside and sat down on his bed.

His formality wasn't a sign that something was wrong, that was just how he was. He was the type of guy who would rather attend a business meeting than a party. He told me this when I asked him why he hadn't gone to a party he had been invited to. In his exact words he had said, "I would rather attend a business meeting than a party, what would a party possibly profit me?" I had looked at him like he was crazy and replied, "I don't know, friendship!" He had waved a dismissive hand and answered, "I don't need companionship. I have you. I don't need any further social life. Why waste my energy trying to satisfy multiple people to a certain extent, when I can just spend my time making one person as happy as I can?"

As I said, he's very odd.

Arlo sat in his rolling chair across from me and narrowed his eyes. I felt my body tense. Arlo had once told me how he liked to study and observe his specimen subjects before conducting an experiment. He had explained it in great detail and I don't believe that I understood most or perhaps any of it at all, but my conclusion was that if he studied his specimens long enough he

would find one of their behavioral patterns which he would then creatively exploit and manipulate. It had seemed a bit gruesome when he first told me this, and still did in a way. Was that how he viewed people? Of course, my most exceptional friend would never hurt a hair on anyone's head, but did he search for people's behavioral patterns and figure out their strengths and weaknesses?

At that moment I felt like I was one of his specimen, being meticulously examined. But examined for what? Strength? Weakness? Or something as simple as any sign of change? Had I made him suspicious somehow? Did he think I'd betrayed him in some way? I tried to think back and retrace my steps.

Arlo hadn't acted this way up until today, so it probably was something I had done recently. Was it something I had done the last time I had seen him, or was it something he had heard about me? I doubted the latter, Arlo wasn't easily fooled and he was surprisingly loyal to me. Whenever I would be in trouble and he was around, he would break all his social "criteria" and defend me no matter what amount of embarrassment it caused him. So it must have been something I did. What had I said to him, showed him, and what had he showed to me recently?

I quickly went through the entirety of our last visit and I realized something, when I had left Arlo had been smiling and excited for next time. So, *was* it something I had done? Or was he trying to decide whether or not to trust me? He was the truest and most reliable friend I had, the possibility that I had offended him in some way and jeopardized our friendship was excruciating.

"Aria," he started.

I immediately perked up. My curiosity was at its peak and I couldn't stand to let my thoughts run wild any longer.

"How have you been feeling lately?"

What? How had I been feeling lately? I was so confused. My thoughts kept trying to dissect the motive behind his question, but the contemplations just kept intercepting and crashing into each other every time. I stared back at him blankly. His eyes were still narrowed and his gaze was so intense I couldn't form any complete thoughts. Where had this come from?

"I've...been feeling...fine."

He slowly nodded and looked me up and down. Then he cocked his head to the side and his eyebrows creased. I always thought that if I could choose any superpower it would be telepathy. The possibility of knowing what anyone and everyone was thinking at anytime had always excited me. What could be better than that? This was one of the times when I desperately needed that superpower.

I narrowed my eyes back at him.

It was like he was trying to peer inside of my head.

There was a knock on the door, but we held each other's gaze.

"I have desserts," Mrs. Milton explained.

The first time I came over to Arlo's house she had been confused and thought I had wanted to sell something; when I told her I had come to see Arlo she had just stared at me for a long time before letting me in. Ever since then she had been overjoyed whenever I visited and baked a different dessert for Arlo and I each time.

"Come in," Arlo answered without taking his eyes off of me.

Mrs. Milton entered the room and instantly froze. I saw her eyes dart back and forth between us with my peripheral vision. Her mouth opened and she cocked her head. She shook it and set a plate of frosted brownies on Arlo's desk.

"Thank you, Mother," he said, still looking at me.

"Thanks, Mrs. Milton." I raised my head and held my stare.

"You're welcome..." she replied dubiously.

Her eyes were wide and she looked just as concerned as she had when she realized I had walked to their house.

"I will leave you two to your," she paused and cleared her throat. "Staring exercise?"

She backed toward the door without turning around, then she finally turned her back on us and, with one last glance and shake of her head, she left.

Arlo picked up a brownie and took a bite out of it, still holding his gaze on me.

"Aria, there's no reason to lie to me."

He said it simply like when he told me not to stress out about a test. My expression switched from matching his own to bafflement. I wasn't lying. Why did he think I was lying? What had happened since our last visit? He raised his eyebrows for reinforcement of his ludicrous statement.

"What are you talking about?" I exclaimed.

He sighed. He turned to the plate of brownies and was about to sit his own back down before hesitating.

"Do you want one?"

I looked at him reproachfully.

“No, I do not,” I declined through gritted teeth.

He gave a nod and sat his brownie down.

“I know there’s something wrong, you can’t tell me there isn’t.”

Once he saw that I was absolutely lost, he continued on.

“Whenever you have come to visit me, we could be having a perfectly wonderful time, and then you check out. Like you’re recalling some bad memory.”

My face drained of color. He had noticed my reaction to the Presence? No one had ever asked me about it before. I was caught off guard. I didn’t know what to say, how to explain, but I knew Arlo wanted an answer and he wanted it right then. My heart started to speed up. I opened my mouth to speak and then closed it. My stomach started twisting and I placed my hand on it as if I could steady it. The Presence was stronger than I’d ever felt it before and I backed myself up against the wall. I closed my eyes and tried to calm the storm, but it wouldn’t stop. It felt like a part of me was tearing everything else inside me apart. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t function. All my muscles were tense and it felt like my mind was trapped underwater, drowning, trying to catch a breath.

“Aria? Are you alright?”

Arlo jumped up from his chair and sat beside me on the bed.

“Aria,” he exclaimed sternly. “I need you to talk to me.”

I shook my head.

“I-”

He stared at me in a sort of controlled panic and I looked away toward his window. The snow had stopped falling.

“I- I have to go.”

I slid to the edge of the bed and started to stand.

“No, I can’t let you go home like this,” Arlo protested. He stood up, blocking the door.

I shook my head. Something was wrong; what was wrong? Something was missing. I couldn’t-

“I just have to go!”

I pushed past him and rushed down the stairs. Because of my socks my foot slipped on the carpet and I frantically grabbed the railing before quickly recovering and racing down the rest of the stairs.

“Aria!” Arlo yelled after me.

I rushed to the coatrack, yanking my coat off of the hook, forcefully tugging my hat down, and grabbing my still soggy shoes and socks in panic. I was pulling everything on when Mrs. Milton came out of the kitchen.

“Oh, leaving so soon?” she asked.

I turned to her and the look on my face caused her to hesitate.

“Are you alright?” she asked with an equal mixture of concern, fear, worry, and confusion.

“Yep! Goodbye!”

I ripped the door open and let it slam shut behind me as I ran away from their house, away from the questions I couldn't answer, away from the Presence lurking in the back of my mind that warned me of unseen dangers. My breath came out in bursts of smoke in front of me. The crisp winter air that had seemed so refreshing on the way there now felt like a sharp chastising knife cutting its way into my lungs. With one last burning breath I screamed and crashed down to my knees. I crumpled into a ball at the roadside. I plopped my head in my hands and started to cry. I was wrapped in a thick blanket, but there was no warmth. It was getting tighter and tighter, strangling my mind. My winter wonderland had become an unforgiving prison. I hated this feeling. Why wouldn't it go away? *Please go away*, I silently whispered. *Why? What do you want?*

And that was when the question that I had asked for my whole life finally started to be answered.

“Who is Iko?”

The look on my parents’ faces was unfiltered shock. Not the kind of shock that an absurd question brought, but the kind that meant I had uncovered something. I stared down at where they sat on the couch with a menacing, accusatory glare.

They looked at each other and then back at me.

“Where did you hear that name?” Mom asked.

When I was at the roadside, that name came to mind. When it had, the Presence was gone. It just...vanished. I knew it, he, had to be the answer. I didn’t know where I had heard it from, but I knew it sounded familiar, and somehow I knew the name belonged to a guy. So, this was it? This Iko guy was the thing that had caused the feeling that had haunted and stalked me for as long as I could remember? My hands started to tremble so I crossed my arms in order to hide them. I didn’t know who he was or why he scared me so much, but I needed to know who this Iko was.

“Who is he?”

“Where did you hear that name?” Mom repeated it harsher and more demanding this time and Dad placed his hand on her knee.

“Sweetheart,” he said to me. “Will you go to your room for a moment please? We’ll call you when you can come out.”

I nodded, glancing over at Mom. I turned and started down the hall. Mom was always so sturdy and grounded when everything was chaotic and uncertain. Her steadiness had always helped to ease my anxiousness. Seeing her that unhinged, it made me feel a bit uneasy. Why was Mom so scared of him? And if he was frightening enough to scare *her*, shouldn’t I have been scared too? I closed the door to my room and laid down on my bed. Thoughts whirled around my mind. I went over various possibilities, but they were all too farfetched. When I wore myself down, I closed my eyes and sighed in relief. The Presence was gone. Soon I would know the truth behind it and it would no longer have any power over me. It would no longer damage my happy memories. I breathed slowly and steadily, regaining my composure. It would all be over soon.

The doorbell rang and my eyes opened. I heard the swing and creak of the door and sat up. I crept over to the wall on the left side of my bed and put my ear up to it.

“Oh, hi Arlo, what brings you here? You’ve never come to our house before.”

Arlo?

“I’ve come to check on Aria,” he replied firmly.

“Son, this really isn’t the best time,” Dad began.

“Of course you can!” Mom chirped with an excessive amount of unnatural enthusiasm.

“W-well,” Dad stuttered.

“Significant thanks, Mrs. Welsh.”

I heard the door close and footsteps quickly advancing to my room. I dashed back to my bed just as he knocked.

“Come in!”

He opened the door a crack and peered in. He slipped through the crack and soundlessly shut the door behind him. I saw his chest rise as he took a deep inhale and sat down next to me. We both stared ahead at the wall, the awkward tension transforming the atmosphere. We were both pondering what to say. Would I tell him about the Presence and Iko and how my parents reacted? Maybe it would be hypocritical not to; I always wanted him to trust me more, but I wasn't willing to trust him myself.

“Arlo!”

He looked over in surprise.

“I need to tell you something.”

I paused and examined his reaction. He looked at me with his full attention and seemed unfazed but undoubtedly invested. Although I wasn't sure I agreed, I was starting to understand what he meant by trying to make one friend as happy as he could instead of multiple friends happy to a certain level. His gaze was so intense and focused it was a little intimidating. I tried not to think about how he would perceive my situation. With my eyelids bolted shut I forced sound from my throat and movement from my lips.

“I've always had this really weird feeling that I called the Presence and I've never told anyone about it except for you and that's why I ran away and I remembered the name Iko and asked my parents about it and they freaked out especially my mom.”

I peeked my eyes open. He was looking at me and I knew he was either confused or thought I was delusional.

“I'm sorry, what did you say?”

“You think I'm crazy, right?” I grumbled and looked away.

“To some extent, yes,”

I shot him a scolding glare.

“But I didn't understand what you said because you were talking too fast.”

I repeated what I had said in a slower, clearer way. My heart and common sense was painfully beating its disapproval into my chest. I fought to keep my breaths steady and smooth. He was staring at my face in deep contemplation.

“Do you believe me?” I asked.

He drew back a bit and his eyebrows creased dramatically.

“Why wouldn’t I? If your parents reacted that way you most likely have indeed discovered something of significance.”

I sighed and he added, “And even if you had just told me about this Presence with no proof it wasn’t in your mind, I would have still believed you. I trust your instincts.”

I beamed and he gave a small smile in return. All this wondering and anxiety and suddenly in one day everything seemed to be going right. I wondered why I finally remembered this that day? I had asked the Presence those questions and had pleaded for mercy just like that many times before. Was it because I had been the most afraid I’d ever been of it then? Or had it been because someone asked me about it? But why only a name? Why not even a vague memory? Why not just a face?

“Perhaps,” Arlo started. I looked up at him. He paused, mouth open, and stared at me. There was some kind of caution in his expression, and I couldn’t decipher the cause of it. He cleared his throat and looked away.

“Never mind.”

I had told him everything, and he still didn’t trust me. A shocked look invaded my face and my eyes narrowed at the injustice.

“No! Tell me!”

“No, it’s too early to attempt to analyze the situation.”

He gently shook his head and combed his fingers through his hair to fix it. He did this whenever he was perplexed or challenged by the idea of something. Usually he would do it over social things. From the prevalence of lookism to the irritation of “inappropriate” manners. This wasn’t exactly social, but it was a mystery. I had never seen Arlo challenged by any intellectual problem before, including mysteries. Once he had loaned me one of his mystery books and he spoiled the ending, which became an annoying pattern. “Arlo! I haven’t read it! Why did you have to spoil the ending?!” I would exclaim. “I didn’t spoil the ending; that was an educated assumption. I’ve only read the first three chapters.” Then I would take the book home, finish it over the weekend, and run all the way to his house and up the stairs yelling, “You were right! You guessed it after only three chapters!” and Arlo would casually and uninterestedly reply, “Oh, okay,” while reading another book. The first time this happened I had vainly, uselessly tried to show him how incredible and how “significant” (as he would say) it was. He would just silently nod while intensely reading in a way where I couldn’t tell whether he was nodding about what I was trying to explain, or about his book.

“I don’t know why we’re worrying about this,” I said. “Once we find out who Iko is everything will be solved.”

Arlo nodded.

“Or one question out of many could be answered, but not the predicament itself,” he suggested with squinted eyes while staring past me in thought.

Classic Arlo. He was always picking apart and “analyzing” everything. And everyone. But, he was wrong. He had to be. After this it would all be over, I had thought. But all my hope had been in vain.