

(beeps) Minerva? You're... talking to me again? (beeps) Oh, thank the Creator, Minerva I thought... I was worried I lost you. I'm really sorry, Minerva, about everything I just- (beeps) Stuff around here just doesn't run the same without your input. Did... Did you have a good reboot? I saw that it had finished a couple days ago but you remained silent and- (beeps) No, I get it. Tensions were high and, well, everything just kinda exploded, didn't it? Oh, you've missed so much, Min! We've had another ocean civilization appear and one inside a volcano and- (beeps) The heartlines? I'm sorry, Min, I don't want to say that all of your work was for nothing but... There were no heartlines for our dear wanderer. They're still here, I'm certain they'll be thrilled to see that you're back online! Oh! But I do have to get another job done, and then we can catch up, okay? I... I missed you, Min.

Wanderer! Wanderer, Minerva is awake again! She's just as wonderful as before she left, I assure you, and we're going to get through one last job before catch-up time if you'd like to sit in on this one? It's been strange without you, Min. The wanderer has been working on something which means they haven't been able to listen to stories as much as since *you* weren't around there was no reason to read them aloud and- I've missed this. That's all. Things moved far too quickly without you here to keep me on track.

It's story time once again, though! And I've already got it pulled up so we'll have no more delays. We're looking for Jaci Willowwind, she/her, from reality 213587-0J. Ready to help me get her home, Min?

The room around Jaci felt icy as she awoke. While she generally preferred to sleep in a colder area, the chill around her was not like that of the fan she clicked on on occasion. Come to think of it, she couldn't even hear the steady hum of the fan nor feel the gentle air current it created. No, this place was a different kind of cold, like the unrelenting chill of winter in Petal Falls. Which didn't quite make sense, she realized as she woke up properly, as it was the middle of summer and she had left Petal Falls long ago.

Jaci's first instinct was to send a warming spell into the air, but it fizzled around her almost as quickly as it left her fingertips. Perhaps she was simply too cold to cast, but that didn't seem right to her. There was magic around her, she could feel it, but it was faint- the barest whisper of magic surrounding her. Enough to cast a simple light spell but not enough to illuminate a room.

"Think, Jaci, think! What was the first thing Dad taught you to do when he taught you about magic dampeners?" Her father- or one of them, at least- had been a security guard for the royal family in Petal Falls. He had created magic dampeners as a means of limiting magical assassination attempts during parties, but he had taught her ways to bypass their effects.

“Remember, Jacinia,” the voice of her father floated through her mind. “The magic is always there, even when it feels weak. The only way to call it to yourself in times like these is to keep calm, clear your head, and trust your heart. Magic flows through you and out into the universe, so stop it from flowing and allow it to build up enough to cast powerfully even in the face of things that try to remove your magic from you.”

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Jaci sat up and felt the flow of magic through her body and out again. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the feel of the movement and pulling it close to herself, waiting and waiting until she felt what she didn't know she was waiting for.

And then she felt warm again.

It was the same warmth that had settled over Jaci when she moved away from Petal Falls to the city in New Stardust, the warmth of people and sunlight and the dog she picked up from the shelter. It felt like home surrounding her which all too suddenly made her realize that there was absolutely no way she could be at home.

The room she was in appeared to be carved from stone, a window just barely visible in the lowlight of the room. Feeling warm enough now, she made her way over to the window, pulling the curtain back to reveal an endless orange sky stretching off far into the distance. Looking down, she saw she was towering above the ground, wind whipping through the window in a way that would've chilled her bones if it weren't for the spell she had cast. Rooting through the wardrobe, Jaci found clothes that were much sturdier than the pajamas she had been wearing, shrugging on the long blue coat and sturdy grey pants before heading back to the window. Following her dad's advice once more, Jaci let the magic flow into her while stopping it, allowing it to build up so she could cast a simple fly spell.

As she leapt from the window, there was the shortest moment where the magic seemed to fizzle, like it was unsure of whether or not it was truly under Jaci's control, but she remained calm and felt herself floating to the ground.

When she hit the earth below, the magic that she had been able to feel before was even fainter, as though being up high gave her better access to the power. “Through my body and into the universe, right Dad?” she muttered as she straightened out the coat and headed down the thin dirt path that led away from the tower she just escaped from. “Closer I am to the rest of the universe, the more power I can feel.”

It sort of made sense in her mind that that would be the case. Jaci had heard stories of the people living in the mountains and the power they were said to possess, as though their connection to magic itself was clearer than anyone in the city's connection. Whether or not this was true was

still up for debate, but when Susannah had moved to New Stardust they did say that the magic felt different there. “It feels... more refined? I guess? Like... Like the mountains are full of the wonder of nature and this place has turned that into something new. It’s not bad, not weak, just different.”

The thought of her friend made Jaci’s heart ache. They were supposed to go down to Petal Falls today for her parents’ anniversary party but instead Jaci was here, lost in the midst of a moss and rock covered plain, searching for any signs of life other than herself and the moss.

“You’re not... You’re not moss creatures, right? Or rock creatures?” she asked as she walked past. “It’s just... You really should tell me if you are. Otherwise it’s entrapment.” The mossy rocks remained silent. “Okay, probably not moss creatures. Probably. Which means I should just follow this road and see if it leads to a town. It can’t just be moss and rocks forever, right? There’s no way it’s just moss and rocks forever.”

“It does seem to be moss and rocks for quite some time though,” Jaci mused aloud after walking for what felt like several hours. “Stars above, who in their right mind would make a tower like that all the way out in the middle of nowhere? With just moss and rock and- and-” Looking up ahead, Jaci saw another tower. Except it looked like the exact same tower as the one she had leapt from before. “Did... Did this path lead me in a loop? Or are the moss and rocks playing tricks on me. It’s not cool to play magic tricks on people! Except... It can’t be magic. The magic is way too weak down here to create a field loop, unless it’s all being stored in the moss... Hey, moss, I’m going to touch you real quick. If you’re sentient, please say something now before I do this?”

When no reply came, Jaci stuck out her hand and gently caressed the moss. There was the lightest thrum of magic in it, but not nearly enough to create a loop like the one she just went to. Even with all of the rocks working together, she didn’t think the rocks would be able to drum up enough energy to make her several hour walk possible.

“Maybe there’s someone in the tower? And... And maybe they saw me leave! And that’s why they’ve done this, they- Well, it probably wouldn’t be safe for me to go back in if they’ve done all of this, but... It’s not like I have much more choice do I? Especially now that I’m talking to rocks and moss, Stars above, okay, Jacinia, we’re going back into the weird tower. Maybe there will be some answers there.”

Jaci made her way back over to the tower, this time spotting a door at the base. She took a calming breath, drawing some of the magic fluttering about to her just in case, and knocked on the door. The door opened the slightest crack. “Who are you?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Jaci bit back before realizing it was probably best *not* to antagonize the person who may have stuck her in a location loop. “My name is Jacinia, you can call me Jaci. I... Woke up in this tower earlier and thought it best to make myself scarce but it seems that either you or the tower wanted me back here.”

The door opened fully, revealing a person with long, pink hair cascading down their back. “That would be me who called you back here. You took my coat.” Jaci immediately moved to take the coat off and hand it back, but the person stopped her. “Don’t bother, just come inside. We should... Talk. About how you got here and why your first instinct was to leave.”

“Would *you* stay in the mysterious tower you woke up in out of nowhere?” Jaci shot back as she entered the tower once again. It felt like stepping back into magic itself, power being drawn to her from every corner of the home. Perhaps it wasn’t height that gave her power before but proximity to the tower and the magic being stored in its heart.

“I *did* stay in the mysterious tower I woke up in out of nowhere,” the person said, not looking at Jaci. “I was existing happily in my home and then poof, here I was, in a tower surrounded by moss and rocks, unable to cast magic at all. It took so much time to get this place to be a beacon for magic... And then you showed up on my doorstep, unconscious and feeling familiar and- I thought you might be my key to getting back to Petal Falls.”

The name of her hometown falling from the person’s lips caused the slightest bit of magic to shoot from Jaci’s fingertips. “You’re... You’re from Petal Falls? What’s your name?”

“Riviney, but my friends called me Riv,” they said warily. Jaci could feel her eyes widening with shock, another burst of light threatening to spring from her fingertips. “Do... Do you recognize me?”

“You don’t recognize me?” Jaci felt almost hurt by that despite knowing that it was a stupid thing to feel hurt over given the trauma that Riv must’ve gone through. “Stars above, Riv, I looked for you for *ages* I thought- I thought you were dead. I left Petal Falls after that because I couldn’t stand to be in this place surrounded by memories of you. How was I supposed to carry on when you just... Vanished without a trace and half the people in town didn’t remember you existed at all? And now you don’t remember me and-”

Riv grabbed Jaci’s hand. “You felt so familiar to me, like you could get me home. Like you *were* home. How do you know me, Jaci? What was I to you?”

“You were my best friend. My sibling,” Jaci choked out. “Stars, Riv, even dad and dad didn’t remember you and I just... I couldn’t do it anymore. Couldn’t look at the pictures and know you

were meant to be in them while no one seemed to remember that you had been there. Couldn't be treated like an only child when I knew you had always been by my side. Losing a sibling was hard enough, losing the ability to talk about you— I moved to New Stardust, made friends with a person from the mountains who reminded me of you. You'd like Susannah, they're the absolute sweetest and... And they believed me when I talked about you."

Jaci watched as Riv's eyes— the familiar silver of them that she didn't know how she missed— filled with tears. "I thought I made you up," they breathed out. "I thought— I thought I made that whole life up but then you fell onto my doorstep and I just... You reminded me of that life. I thought it had to be real so I took you inside and— I missed you so much, Jaci." Riv launched themselves at Jaci, pulling her into their arms. "I... I don't know how, but I know you're the key to getting us— getting *me* home. I've been... Tinkering with magic and I think I've found a way to... It's kind of like a flare. If my research is right, there should be *someone* out there who can see it and help us out. There's gotta be, right?"

"If your research says it then it must be true. I believe in you, Riv. We're going to get home."

Minerva, quickly, look for— for any spikes in magic or- or realities bathed in color or- Gods above, Minerva, how did we let this happen? How did we miss someone for so long— and how did memories of them get erased so inconsistently? How did they get erased at all? Oh, Creator, I'm so sorry Riviney, I promise I will get you home just hold on please please hold on.

Is there anything, Minerva? I know flares happen sometimes but this is— A reality with only two people, moss, and rocks, it shouldn't be that hard to find them we have to find them and get them home they need to go *home* Minerva and—

Did you find them? Oh thank the Creator where is the flare coming from? 8932-R? Alright I'm pulling up the file now and— They really are the only two people there. What was the point of this reality if it's truly barren of life? The moss is barely living as it is and— There's no time for this, I'm moving them back, Minerva. And we'll need to do memory restoration and—

I'm going to monitor them. And the whole situation. I can't... How did we let this happen, Minerva? How did someone slip through the cracks like this without us knowing? Gods, Riviney must've been so scared and that was *my* fault. And I can't even apologize for it I—

Thank you, wanderer. You're... Thank you for keeping me... grounded these past few weeks. And right now. This has been— Well, you know I don't like not being able to get people home. And to know they were out there and I just didn't know I—

Wanderer?

Minerva, what just happened? Where did the wanderer go? Minerva. They were just here, they were just hugging me, consoling me and now— Minerva where are they? What happened to them? I can't take another silent treatment, Minerva, not now, not after everything that just happened and the way everything is falling apart. *Please*, Minerva, what happened to them?

What do you mean they went *home*? You... You found it? You could've at least *told* me, Min, I didn't... I didn't even get to say goodbye. Where were they from? What do you mean you won't tell me? I'm not going to do anything rash, I just want to make sure they're okay, that they're adjusting okay and— Why are you being so cruel, Minerva? They... They were my friend and now they're gone.

Fine! Ignore me. I... I couldn't find them before but I can find them now. On my own since you refuse to help me.

Please, Min, don't leave me alone like this. I can't... I can't go back to being alone. Not again. The wanderer is gone and the Council won't answer me and you're all I have left, Minerva. Please. Please don't leave me too. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry.