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BLOMGKED
An InCrypted Story

OSHEA
Blocked

by

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“We don’t always grow into the lives we thought we’d have when we were children. That’s not a bad thing. It’s nice to meet the people we never expected to become.” — Alice Healy

The athletic field of Lewis and Clark High School, Portland, Oregon

Three years ago

“Everybody scream! Everybody shout! We’re gonna light it up and BURN THEM OUT!” The entire Trailblazer cheer squad shouted in unison, bodies moving together with the kind of effortless fluidity that only came after long practice and longer struggle. Most of us had been working as a team for four years. We formed a tight enough core group that we had been able to assimilate our underclassmen with a minimum of effort, folding them into the squad so quickly that most people didn’t even realize our lineup had changed. That was part of what made our squad so good: we put the needs of the group before the needs of the individuals. Once you put on the uniform, you were a Trailblazer, now and forever.

The crowd hooted and clapped as we shook our pom-poms in the time-honored way of high school cheer squads everywhere. Sophie did a cartwheel across the front of the line, which elicited even more cheering. By this point in the season, people knew what it meant when one of our flyers started lining herself up that way: it meant the real show was about to start. Finally. If I had to spend one more minute shaking my ass like a glorified pep rally prop, I was going to scream.

The largest girls on the squad flung themselves into position like they were driving their heels into the ground, creating the foundation of our human tower and providing the anchor that would keep the rest of us from toppling. If a single base at the bottom of our tower lost her balance, it was all over. We didn’t wait to see if they were stable: as much as we had practiced, we trusted each other. The second tier swarmed the line of girls, hooking our feet into the joined hands of the first tier and using them to launch ourselves up onto their shoulders. We spun to face the bleachers, locking ourselves into place with nothing more than our ankles and our will to hold the line. The cheering from the stands got louder—and then Sophie was running in our direction, legs pumping, ponytail flying, ready to soar. She skipped up the tiers of girls like gravity no longer applied to her, stopping only when her feet were on the shoulders of the girl standing next to me: Wendy, who was a senior like me and Sophie and all but two of the girls in this tower. Her eyes were fixed straight ahead, at the crowd, and I tried to keep my own eyes pointed forward. Anything would have been better than seeing Wendy cry.

Her tears weren’t eroding her stability. Then, as always, Wendy was a rock. And then my hand was under Sophie’s left foot, holding her up, raising her into the air, and I knew that on the other side of Wendy there was another girl, one of the Juniors, holding Sophie’s right foot equally high.

I used to want to be a flyer, back when I thought that puberty would somehow turn me into a typical member of my family. I’d been taller than my sister Verity since I was twelve, but I’d expected it to stop. Surprise. I was one of nature’s bases, and nothing was going to change that.

The girls at the bottom of the tower clapped their hands. We thrust Sophie up into the air, holding her stable as she rose. Wendy put up her hands, and Sophie transferred her feet, resting her weight entirely on Wendy’s palms. I clapped. The Junior girl on the other side of Wendy clapped. Behind me, almost drowned out by the sound of the crowd, one of the spotters shouted, “One-two-three—”

On “four,” Sophie was flying, her diminutive frame soaring into the air and flipping once, twice, three times before she jackknifed in on herself and plummeted like a falling star into the waiting basket formed by three of our spotters. Wendy, the Junior girl, and I all flipped backward off the tower, spinning twice before we
touched down. As soon as our feet left the shoulders of the girls at the bottom, they were tumbling forward, heading for their own marks. The crowd was cheering wildly, like they had just seen us all pull rabbits out of our nonexistent hats. That was the power of cheerleading.

Halftime was coming to an end, and the football team would be retaking the field in a matter of minutes. We flung each other from place to place, tumbling, spinning, flying, throwing each other into the air like confetti and coming back down seemingly without effort. The laws of physics didn’t apply to us in that moment. They weren’t allowed.

Glitter hung around us like a cloud by the time we finished, hitting our final marks and striking our own versions of the football team’s touchdown poses. In that moment, we became individuals, splitting the squad back into its component parts. We would never be a single body again. Most of the Seniors were crying, blinking rapidly as they tried to keep their mascara from running. For four years, we had been a single organism, strong and fast and willing to fight to protect our own. Now…

It was over. Some of the girls might cheer together again at camp, or at college if they wound up in the same schools, but it wouldn’t be the same. It never was. My own eyes were dry. I had loved my squad as much as anyone. Unlike most of my teammates, I had always known that love wasn’t enough to change the world.

“I’m gonna miss this, Melody,” said Wendy, still holding her pose next to mine. The floodlights made the glitter in her hair sparkle like she was aspiring to become a Disney Princess after graduation.

“Yeah,” I said. “Me, too.”

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So my name’s not Melody, and this isn’t a story about cheerleading, although I sort of wish that it was. I loved cheerleading. Every day that I spent on the squad was a gift, because I wasn’t the sort of girl who belonged there. I was more Wednesday Addams than Marcia Brady, more sarcastic than sunny, and more cynical than cheer-tastic. And none of that mattered to the girls on the Lewis and Clark High School cheer squad, not once I’d crushed my tryout into tiny little pieces under my tennis shoe-clad heel. I could do a standing back-tuck with the best of them, and even if I was never going to be a flyer, I had a stability and confidence that girls with three times my training could never hope to match.

Too bad Melody West—my nom de plume in high school, a cheerleader’s name if there ever was one—didn’t actually exist. She was just a way for Antimony Price to get the vital social skills that homeschooling might deny her…deny me, I mean. Melody was a persona, not a person, and while she and I shared a lot of things, there was one major thing we could never share with each other, no matter how much I might wish for it:

We could never share a future.

That day on the field, with the lights burning my eyes and the air burning my lungs, until it felt like I was going to pull a Jean Grey and ignite from within—and if you don’t get the X-Men reference, well, there’s one more piece of evidence that I should never have been considered for the cheer squad—that was my last game. All the girls who’d shared my sphere of influence for the last four years were going on to bigger and better things, or at least college cheerleading, which meant shorter skirts and more dangerous stunts. It was a trade worth making as far as all of them were concerned. As far as I was concerned, too, but the only way I could have made it was by running away from my family, becoming Melody West in truth as well as name, and forsaking the duty I’d been raised to fulfill.

My name is Antimony Price, and it’s my job to protect the monsters of the world from the most dangerous
things in existence: humans. And sadly, that’s not a job you can do from six feet in the air, no matter how much you might want to fly.

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I was sitting on my bed, paging through the latest issue of *Astonishing X-Men*, when someone knocked on my bedroom door. I looked up, scowling at the brightly colored comic posters that covered the boring white wood of the door itself, and shouted, “If this is about dinner, I’m not hungry.”

“Good thing it’s not about dinner, then,” said my father. The door swung half-open, and his head poked around the edge, revealing his pointed, foxlike face, crowned by his shaggy, unkempt mop of off-blond hair. He pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose, taking in my cross-legged position and the welter of comics that surrounded me, and asked, “Is this a bad time?”

“No worse than any other,” I conceded, leaning back on my hands and looking at him. “What’s up?”

“It’s been six weeks since you graduated from high school, and your mother and I were just wondering when you were going to find some sort of training activity to occupy your time.” He stepped the rest of the way into my room, leaving the door open in case he needed to beat a quick retreat. “You can’t spend the whole summer sitting in your room reading comic books. We’re not asking you to get a job or anything—”

“That’s good, since I already tore up Melody’s social security card, and Uncle Ted hasn’t supplied me with new ID yet,” I interjected.

Dad kept talking like I hadn’t said anything. “But we do want you to get out and socialize. Be where there are people, keep putting yourself out there. Be part of the world.”

“You are coming dangerously close to reciting lyrics from *The Little Mermaid*,” I said.

“I raised two daughters. You’re lucky I don’t spend more time reciting lyrics from Disney movies,” he replied. “I’m serious, Annie. We want you to get out of the house and find an activity.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What do you suggest, O Father?” I asked, uncrossing my legs and sliding into a standing position. “I can’t cheerlead, because I just graduated from high school and I’m not going to college for at least a year. I can’t go back to gymnastics—you pulled me out when I was twelve, remember? Now why was that? Oh, right: I was attracting too much attention by refusing to fail in order to stay out of the regional competitions. I could go back to circus school—I still have that ID around here somewhere—but you pulled me out when I was fourteen. Hmm. I wonder why that could have been?”

“You’re not being fair,” said Dad, in a hurt tone.

“I’m not being fair?” I echoed, taking a step toward him. “Everything I have ever been good at, you’ve taken away from me because it might attract attention. You let Verity go to international dance competitions, but if there’s a chance my picture might wind up in the local paper, that’s it, sorry Annie, you’re out. Don’t you think you’re showing a little bit of a double standard where your precious daughters are concerned?”

“The risk of someone finding out that we’re here—” he began.

“I don’t even look like the rest of you!” I shouted. His mouth snapped shut. I took another step forward. “Verity looks like Mom, like Grandma. Alex looks like you. Even Elsie and Artie at least look like they belong. I’m a throwback. The Covenant is never going to find us because I stick with something. Don’t you
He didn’t say anything. He just looked at me. That had always been Dad’s most powerful weapon in our arguments: silence and sadness. I didn’t know how to deal with it, and so most of the time I would wind up apologizing for whatever I’d done that he hadn’t liked, even if I felt I was completely in the right. Little girls weren’t supposed to make their fathers look so disappointed that they couldn’t breathe. My resolve splintered under that look, but for once, it didn’t break: the bulwark of my anger was strong enough to hold it in place.

I took a deep breath, and said, as carefully as I could, “I understand why it’s so important for us to stay hidden, Daddy, I really do. But you close every door I try to open because it’s too dangerous, and then you wonder why I never do anything. Cheerleading was amazing. I got to be myself—or at least, a version of myself—with the same girls for four years. I got to be part of a team. And you didn’t take it away from me this time, and I can’t even start to say how much that meant to me, but time had to go and ruin everything, and now you want me to get over it instantly, just because you’re worried about me being isolated. I’ve always been isolated. You isolated me, for my own good.”

“And for the good of others,” he said, his gentle tone not quite concealing his distress at my words. Good. I wanted him to be distressed. I sure as hell was. “You always played too roughly for the other children. You weren’t as good at hiding yourself as your siblings were.”

“I was five,” I said. “Give me a little credit for improving since then.”

He sighed. “All right. I’ll give you a little credit, and I’ll give you my word: whatever you decide you’re going to do next, your mother and I will not interfere unless it poses a real and immediate threat to our security—and we will consult with you and discuss that threat before we make any decisions about whether or not you can continue. You’re an adult now, Annie, legally at least, and while I’m tempted to say that while you live under my roof you’ll live by my rules, we both know that isn’t going to happen. We have to learn how to work together, and you have to keep getting out there and learning more about fitting into the world without leaving a Price-shaped hole for the Covenant to find. All right?”

“All right,” I said. He stepped forward, closing the distance between us, and folded me into a paternal hug. Somehow, despite his having admitted to being wrong—at least a little wrong—about the way I’d been handled, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d been played.

I was going to have to find something to do with the rest of my summer.

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“Not seeing the problem, tiny cousin,” said Elsie, slouching comfortably back in the red vinyl booth. If I’d attempted that angle, I would have hurt myself, but she made it look like the only way anyone should ever sit in a burger joint. Her naturally blonde hair was styled in an array of rumpled waves, the bottom inch or so of each one dyed a bright cherry red that almost matched the vinyl. She looked like a pin-up advertisement for fries. Which were supposedly mine, since she claimed to be watching her weight, but half of them had already disappeared down her throat, and the other half seemed destined to follow. “Your parents want you to get out of the house and they’re willing to give you cash money rather than expecting you to get a job, so why not take advantage? We could road trip. See the sights. Head up to Vancouver and enjoy the glories of legal marijuana and hot Canadian girls.”

“Okay, one, I don’t smoke pot—and neither do you, so stop trying to impress me with your edgy ways—and two, the last hot Canadian girl you tried to pick up turned out to be a waheela. You could have gotten eaten.”
Elsie propped her chin in the heel of her hand, expression turning dreamy. “Yeah, but what a way to go.”

I threw a fry at her. “Will you please take this seriously?”

“I am, I am,” she protested, sitting up straight for the first time since we’d sat down. “I just don’t get why you’re discussing this with me instead of with Artie. He’s your go-to guy for complicated life problems. I’m the girl who gets you into the good parties.”

“You’re more important than that, Elsie,” I said. “And besides, Artie and Sarah are at a comic convention this weekend, and she’ll kill me if I distract him.”

Elsie sighed heavily. “Little brother is never going to admit that he has it bad for that girl. You know that, right? They’re both going to be in their eighties, still freaking out when their hands accidentally touch above a box of back issues, still pining for one another. They’re going to pine so hard they’ll reforest Mount Shasta.”

“Mount Shasta hasn’t been deforested,” I said.

“I’m thinking ahead.” Elsie picked up her milkshake—somehow exempt from the “watching my weight” embargo that was causing her to eat all my fries—and took a healthy slurp before waving it like a conductor’s baton, asking, “So what do you want to do? You can’t cheerlead unless you start college.”

“Yeah, and college cheer squads are really serious about their competitions,” I said glumly. “Any squad worth joining would want to go and show off their skills, and I’d wind up pulled off the team before I had time to do a double back-tuck.”

Elsie cocked her head, expression going thoughtful. I shrunk back against the booth. A thoughtful Elsie was a dangerous Elsie. “So you need something to occupy your time—preferably some kind of team sport, since you’re supposed to be learning how to play nicely with the other children, and absolutely something physical, since you’re also supposed to be staying in shape. And it can’t be the sort of thing where you wind up in televised competitions, or where your face is really recognizable all the time. Am I basically getting this right?”

“Pretty much, yes,” I said.

Slowly, she began to smile. “I’m going to need you to trust me, hard as that might be…but I think I have just the thing.”

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Half an hour later, we were standing in front of a deserted-looking warehouse in a part of downtown that I had never visited voluntarily (although I had chased a few misbehaving bogeymen through the area, since they thought that a fear of tetanus would slow me down). The warehouse doors were closed, but there were multiple cars parked around the area, some battered and rusty with bumper stickers and duct tape holding them together, others new and shiny enough to be tempting targets for car thieves and vandals. It didn’t make sense. Neither did the shouts and occasional shrill bursts of whistling coming from inside the warehouse.

“So your solution to my needing to get out more is to take me to an isolated location and get me murdered,” I said slowly. “That’s…well, it’s a creative approach to the problem. I have to give you credit for that much, even as I fall back on my natural desire to keep breathing and suggest that we go see a movie or something.”

“Chill out, Annie,” said Elsie, taking my arm in one hand and pulling me with her as she started toward the warehouse door. “These are good chicks. You’ll like them.”
“Oh, we’re visiting a chicken farm,” I said faintly. But it was too late to get away: Elsie had already hauled me halfway to a door marked “Staff Only” and covered in spray paint squiggles. She opened the door with her free hand, and the noise from inside got even louder before she stepped inside, pulling me with her.

The warehouse was dimly lit and virtually empty, with nothing to impede my field of vision. That was as nice as the scene in front of me was confusing. Someone had set up a flat wooden track in the middle of the room, surrounding it with padded mats, and about twenty women on roller skates were circling the track, their heads down and their elbows pumping like they were personally offended by the existence of friction. I stared.

“Roller derby?” I asked, in a tone that couldn’t seem to make up its mind whether it was startled or offended. That was good: I couldn’t make up my mind either.

“Roller derby,” said Elsie smugly. She waved to one of the people who wasn’t skating, a slim Asian woman in a black and white striped shirt with a whistle held tightly between her cherry red lips. The woman waved back. Elsie grinned before murmuring, “Ex-girlfriend. She doesn’t skate, but she coaches as ‘Cherry T. Case,’ and she’s one of the best in the business.”

“And we’re visiting your ex-girlfriend on her home territory because…?”

“Because we parted friends, and I think she holds the answer to all your problems.” Elsie resumed pulling me forward, until we were standing at the edge of the rink, separated from the passing skaters only by the padded buffers. “It’s a team sport.”

“You’re insane.”

“It teaches cooperation, tactics, and how not to scream when someone twice your size pile-drives you into the track.” Elsie was still beaming, her eyes glued to the circling bodies on the track.

They were an awesome assortment of women, I had to give her that: skinny, fat, and everything in-between, visibly tattooed and apparently unadorned, short-haired, long-haired, dark skinned and light skinned and freckled and scarred. They looked like cheerleaders from the planet Mars. People who only see cheer from the outside never understand how diverse it is, how you need the bases and the flyers and the strong, dependable girls who can stand at the middle of the pyramid and keep the whole thing from tumbling down.

Watching the women on the track was almost like having my squad back together, even if it was only for a few minutes.

Elsie’s ex was trotting toward us, her whistle now bumping against her chest with every step she took. She nimbly side-stepped a skater’s trailing arm, coming to a stop a few feet away. “Elsie,” she said, sounding pleased enough to see my cousin, even if she hadn’t yet acknowledged me. “What brings you here? Slumming again? I already told you, I’m engaged.”

“Yes, and I am really looking forward to coming to the wedding, irritating Jean with my presence, and hooking up with a bridesmaid,” said Elsie. “I wanted to introduce you to my cousin.” She paused, shooting me a panicked look. I swallowed a groan. Once again, Elsie had embarked upon a glorious plan without thinking it all the way through. Leaping without looking was a specialty of hers.

“I’m Annie,” I said, extending my hand toward the woman in the striped jersey. “Annie Thompson.” The shortened form of my first name was common enough to be safe to use, especially after I’d been Melody for so long, and “Thompson” was both nicely generic and the last name of the female lead in *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, which meant that I would remember it if I had any need to keep using it. Which I didn’t anticipate from the day so far: roller derby was fun to watch, but it didn’t feel like the sort of thing I was going to wind up
“Nice to meet you, Annie,” said the woman, grasping my hand and shaking it firmly. She had surprisingly strong fingers. “I’m Dani, although most people here call me ‘Cherry.’ So you’re interested in roller derby, huh? You ever skate before?”

This was starting to feel like a set-up. Fortunately, I had an answer prepared. “All the time when I was a kid. My parents felt it was good exercise and less dangerous than a skateboard.”

“I don’t know if I’d agree with that last part, but they’re right about the exercise,” said Dani amiably. “Do you have your own skates? If not, I can recommend a few shops that will get you started. You will need your own protective gear, and we discourage sharing. That stuff can get pretty ripe, and nobody needs to stink like someone else’s sweat.”

“Unless it’s for a fun reason,” interjected Elsie.

“And once again, Elsie takes it to a sexual place in less than a minute and a half,” said Dani.

Elsie shrugged. “It’s my superpower. I am the patron saint of inappropriate innuendo and giving people hickeys right before their mothers show up. I’m considering becoming a religious icon. You think I could get a following?”

“I think the internet is your following,” said Dani, before returning her attention to me. This time she looked me slowly up and down, assessing me with the sort of casual thoroughness that I was only used to receiving from combat instructors and the bra fitters at Nordstrom’s. Finally, she said, “Cheerleader, right? I can’t imagine you were a flyer with a rack like yours, so you probably did base duty and tried really hard not to drop your teammates on their heads.”


“You’re in excellent shape, and you only get that sort of shoulder musculature from gymnastics or cheerleading. Or trapeze, I suppose, but there’s not a circus around here, and Elsie would have tried to scam free tickets when we were dating if she had relatives in a traveling show.”

“Guilty,” said Elsie.

Dani continued calmly, “You’re too tall to be a gymnast, you’re not standing like a modern dancer, and there’s a posture thing that all cheerleaders get—even the serious competitive ones—that you have. It’ll probably go away after we’ve been slapping you around the track for a year or so. I know you’re over eighteen or Elsie wouldn’t have brought you here, and Elsie knows that we’re down three skaters and getting ready to go into the practice season, or again, she wouldn’t have brought you here.”

I crossed my arms defensively over my chest, trying not to look like I was struggling to figure out what she meant by “a posture thing.” I thought I was standing perfectly normally. “And you’re still talking to us because…?”

“Because we need skaters, and you stand like a cheerleader, but the school year is over and Elsie brought you to me.” Dani smiled sweetly. “Also because I’d love to see someone hip-check one of her relatives into the floor. Call it revenge by proxy. Unless you don’t think you have what it takes to hit the track?”

I scowled, dropping my arms. Elsie had dated this woman; Elsie knew how she planned her punches, which
meant Elsie had probably known that Dani would take a sucker-shot at my pride. And that didn’t matter one little bit.

“Where can I buy a pair of skates?” I asked.

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An hour later I was standing just behind the painted starting line on the track, new skates strapped onto my feet, equally new protective gear covering my elbows and knees. The helmet was borrowed. No point in investing that heavily in something that I wasn’t going to be doing beyond today.

And I wasn’t going to be doing it beyond today. This wasn’t for me. I liked flying, clapping, the smell of crushed grass, and the cheering of the crowd. This wasn’t that. But the fact that I had no intention of sticking with this ridiculous excuse for a sport didn’t change the part where the four women in front of me would gladly crush me into paste if I gave them half a chance, which made them the enemy, and more importantly, made me a target. I don’t like being a target. It makes me cranky.

“You clear on what you’re supposed to do?” asked Dani.

“Get through the pack,” I said.

“Right. How are you going to do that?”

“Small weapons fire.”

Dani laughed. That was nice. I had only been half-kidding, but a laugh’s a laugh. “I like you, Thompson. Now let’s see if you still like me in a minute.” She blew her whistle. The four women blocking my access to the rest of the track didn’t so much adjust their positions as sink down into them, giving every impression of having sprouted roots and become one with the warehouse floor. They were wearing roller skates, and anything on roller skates should be moveable, but that wasn’t what they looked like. They looked like an impassable wall, and for a split second I wanted to throw up my hands, declare defeat, and go home to read comic books for the rest of the afternoon.

A Price never declares defeat. I sank down into my own crouch and launched myself forward, gathering as much speed as I possibly could before lunging up onto the toes of my skates and beginning to force my way into their midst. The four women did their best to stop me, blocking with hips, backs, butts—anything but heads or hands. They were scrupulous about avoiding illegal touches, maybe because this was half-demo, half-audition, and there was nothing actually at stake. If I succeeded, maybe I’d stick around and skate with them. If I failed, they got to impress me with their awesome skating skills, and nobody had to feel like they’d lost.

Elsie whooped from the small crowd that had gathered next to the track, watching us. All four team captains for the local league were there, studying my progress with rapacious eyes. The Block Busters and the Slasher Chicks were the two teams that actually needed replacement skaters: whoever joined with them would be alternates at first, never guaranteed to touch track, which was one more reason for me not to take roller derby seriously. I wasn’t looking for a new sport that would keep me warming a bench while other people had all the fun. I could warm the bench just as easily from the comfort and safety of my own bedroom, and I wouldn’t have to put on roller skates to do it.

The first two women were behind me now, their shoulders slamming together on the empty air where I had been only a moment before. I shoved forward like I was going to keep bullying my way forward, and then dropped into a crouch, using the momentary surprise of my last two challengers to open a low passage out of
the mob. The track stretched out in front of me, empty and inviting, and I took off as fast as I could, arms tight against my sides, legs pumping hard. The other women pursued.

I could warm the bench just as easily from home. But by the time I finished my second spin around the track, I knew that I didn’t want to: Elsie had won.

I was going out for roller derby.

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The whole audition process took about an hour and a half. I had the feeling it would have been shorter during actual open tryouts, when they would have had more than one rookie to focus all their attention, disdain, and amusement on, but since I was a latecomer, I was getting the deluxe treatment. I was also a welcome distraction from practice, which explained why members of all four teams had joined in, gleefully, for the various forms of torture that were supposed to prove I was capable of playing a gladiatorial blood sport while on roller skates.

The latest trial was simple: I was on the starting line again, next to a girl who looked like a stiff wind would carry her away. Her hair was the flaxen color of shampoo commercials and CW teen stars, and her elbows looked sharp enough to be classified as bladed weapons. She flashed me a shy smile around her mouth guard before hunkering down into a crouch, ready for the whistle to blow.

“No one expects you to skate faster than Fern,” said Dani, who was still acting as ringleader to this little torture show. “Fern is a freak of nature. We just want to see how long you can keep up with her.”

“Which you can’t,” said another woman—Carlotta, I thought her name was—as she watched impassively from a few feet away. She was one of the only derby girls who seemed annoyed by the way I was disrupting their practice schedule. Elsie apparently had a lot of credit to burn with these people, even though my cousin didn’t seem to really understand much of what we were doing. She was a casual derby enthusiast: she couldn’t tell a jammer from a blocker, she didn’t understand the scoring system, and she was more interested in collecting team shirts than actually rooting for anyone in specific, but all these women seemed to like her, possibly because it’s hard not to like Elsie. Elsie was born one of the world’s likeable people, and I…was not.

We all have our crosses to bear.

“Don’t worry,” said Fern, in a voice so soft and wind-blown that at first I thought she was whispering, until I realized she was just one of those people who naturally sound like a cartoon princess. “I’m not going to be trying to hit you.”

“Thanks, I think,” I said, and sunk into my own crouch. And then the whistle blew, and there was no more time for conversation, or contemplation, or anything but watching Fern accelerate away from me at a speed that shouldn’t have been possible under our current laws of physics. I pushed myself away from the starting line, pumping my arms as I tried to build up speed at something resembling her pace. Catching up to her seemed like a fool’s dream, and so I just focused on going as fast as I could without losing control of my skates and spinning out. I’d managed to get through the audition process without embarrassing myself thus far. I didn’t want to start now.

The air behind Fern felt faintly ionized, and smelled fresher than the air in the rest of the warehouse. I swallowed a laugh. Wasting air would just have slowed me down, and suddenly I had a real reason to want to devote my nights and weekends to roller derby: Fern wasn’t human. And if Fern wasn’t human, who was to
say that the rest of these women were?

Urban cryptids have a lot of trouble finding communities where they can feel comfortable and accepted, even in a place as devotedly off-the-wall as Portland. “Weird” turns out to come with a surprising number of rules and regulations, many of which seemed geared at keeping the non-human members of the populace safely out of sight and out of mind. Roller derby threw most of those rules aside in favor of proper safety gear and the willingness to eat track every so often. I had been looking for a community of cryptids that needed me.

I might have just found it.

Fern’s single-lap lead turned quickly into a four-lap lead, but I kept pushing on, learning the little quirks of the track, the places where it was possible to cut a few feet off my total by jumping from one section to another, the places where the wood was just worn enough to be a hazard if I hit it at the wrong angle. I got faster. The people watching us were nodding thoughtfully, and some of them actually looked halfway impressed.

The whistle blew again. Fern slowed down, dropping to something like a human pace as she glided onward to the starting line. I rolled to a stop beside her, and gave serious thought to stretching out on the track for a nice nap. No one was skating on it at the moment, and if they decided to change that, they could just make me part of the obstacle course. Circle the track, try not to trip anyone, jump over the semi-conscious newbie sleeping at the starting line.

“Not bad,” said Dani. “How are you feeling?”

“Blerg,” I said.

“Well, you’re not puking all over everything—and if you start to feel like that’s going to change, take out your mouth guard first—so that’s good.” Dani lifted her clipboard. “So far I think we like you. Leave me your number and we’ll get back to you next week.”

I stared at her, panting and still fighting not to lay down on the track, and said, intelligently, “Huh?”

“You’re tired and you smell like a dead moose; I don’t want you making any decisions in this condition,” said Dani. “Besides which, our team captains need to discuss your performance and decide whether they want to take a chance on you. We need skaters, but that doesn’t mean we’re desperate.”

I kept staring at her for a moment longer, trying to make sense of what she was saying. Anger flared behind my eyes. They didn’t want me? I had gone to the trouble of trying out, I had volunteered to participate—which was not a thing I did lightly—and they didn’t want me? Well, screw them. I didn’t want them either. I didn’t…

Fern flashed me a quick, shy smile, there and gone so fast that I might have imagined it. I sighed. Cryptid community. Family duty.

“Let me give you my cell,” I said.

*They didn’t have showers at the warehouse, which seemed like an almost criminal omission after all the sweating we’d been doing. I stripped out of the shorts and tank top I’d been wearing for my audition, forced my sticky body back into my street clothes, and slouched to the curb where Elsie was waiting. She was leaning comfortably against the side of her car, looking like she was auditioning to be the latest roller derby
pin-up girl, and the smirk on her smug, lovely face was almost enough to move me to violence.

“Well?” she said. “Do I know where to find the perfect team sports for you, or do I know where to find the perfect team sports for you? The praise can begin now.”

“They’re never going to find your body.” I shouldered past her, hip-checking her out of the way as I fumbled with the handle of the passenger side door. “I’ll tell your parents you gave me your car right after you bought a bus ticket to Los Angeles. They’ll believe me. They always believe me.”

“And then Sarah will come over to read comics with my brother, and she’ll read the guilt plastered across your mind, and the jig will be up,” replied Elsie, unruffled by either my threats or my shoving. She pushed away from the car, strolling lazily around it to the driver’s side door. “What’s the big deal? You said you needed an activity. I found you an activity. An awesome activity full of hot chicks and violence.”

“I’m not as interested in hot chicks as you are,” I said, sliding into the car. “The violence I like, but…I’m not even sure they’re going to take me. We may have just been wasting our time and getting my hopes up.”

Too late, I realized what I had just said. Elsie slid into her seat, giving me one of her rare serious looks, and asked, “Getting your hopes up?”

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance you’d be willing to forget that you heard that.”

“Nope.”

“Fine.” I buckled my seatbelt and sighed, sinking deeper into the seat. “Yes, they’re really neat ladies, and I’d like the opportunity to get to know them better. And yes, the skating part was amazing. I think I could really love this sport. But that doesn’t mean they’re going to take me.”

“Roller derby is a funny thing.” Elsie started the engine, pulling away from the curb. “I don’t really understand the scoring, or how the game is supposed to be played, or why there’s so little casual nudity, but I do understand one thing: these women, all of them, they’re team players. They understand what it means to be a part of something bigger than themselves.”

“Okay…”

“Just let me finish, Annie, all right?” Elsie shook her head, eyes remaining on the road. “You don’t like people very much. We both know that. You put up with them, and some of them you care about, but for the most part, you’d be happy if you were that dude on The Twilight Zone who lived through the bomb being dropped and then had all the books in the world and no one to tell him to put them down.”

“He broke his glasses,” I said. “I’ll pass.”

Elsie ignored me as she doggedly continued, “That’s why you need a team. You need people who you have to give a crap about, or I’m scared you’re going to forget how caring about anyone outside your family works. That’s a really lonely way to live. I want something better for you. I want you to have people you can care about.”

I blinked. “Wow, Elsie. That’s…deep and maybe creepy.”

“Besides, the team captain for the Concussion Stand is hot. You should join the league so I can come to practice and watch.”
I laughed despite myself, swatting my cousin on the shoulder with one hand. Elsie grinned and swatted back before putting her hand back on the wheel, and we drove on, into the streets of Portland, leaving the warehouse behind.

*

A week later, I was standing on a log with a can of hairspray and a crème brûlée torch, trying to set fire to the giant flesh-eating dragonflies of unknown origin that had been strafing the reservoir for the past week. The dragonflies had been absolutely delighted to take several bites out of me while we were canvassing the area, but they were stubbornly refusing to hold still and catch fire. I was beginning to question “fire bad” as a mechanism for getting rid of monstrous insects. (And they were monstrous insects, with the intellect to match. Dad had tried flash cards, mathematical signaling, and a letter board before he declared them to be non-sapient. That, combined with their unashamedly hostile nature, was what made killing them okay.)

Dad was crouched in the bushes not too far away, using his sniper rifle to pluck the wings off the moving bugs while I distracted them with fire. Mom was somewhere on the other side of the reservoir with Grandma’s katana, a bunch of sample jars, and enough napalm to deforest the entire area if we weren’t careful. As long as the giant dragonflies didn’t start producing reinforcements, we were probably good.

My phone started ringing.

I managed—somehow—not to drop the lit torch into the tall grass, where it would have made my life way too interesting. Artie and Sarah were back at Artie’s place, trying to find any reference to the insects in the family field guides; it was entirely possible they’d actually managed to dig something up. I tucked the can of hairspray under my arm, waving the torch at the encroaching dragonflies, and pulled my phone out of my pocket. The number was blocked. That just made it more likely that it was Sarah, who thought that numbers were too important to share with just anybody.

“Talk to me,” I said, bringing the phone to my ear.

“Hi, this is Dani Tran, calling for Annie Thompson.”

For the second time in under a minute, I nearly dropped the torch. “Speaking! I mean, uh, speaking. I am speaking. This is Annie.” My heart felt like it was trying to take an all-expenses-paid vacation at the bottom of my stomach. Dragonflies were nowhere near as frightening as learning the outcome of my audition.

“Great! I’ll get right down to it: both the Block Busters and the Slasher Chicks have said they would be happy to have you skating for them. You’ll start as an alternate, and we’re going to work you as a blocker, with the potential to become a pivot if you show promise in the art of the jam. Practice is Wednesday afternoon at six o’clock sharp, if you’re still interested. You are still interested, right?”

“I am so interested.” A dragonfly got too close. I torched its left wing as I tried to rapidly sort through what I remembered about the teams in question. Fern, the girl who had skated in a way that broke the laws of physics, was a Slasher Chick. My decision was easy. “I’d like to skate for the Slasher Chicks.”

“Sounds great. You given any thought to a name?”

My family had been fighting monsters for generations. That fight was inevitably going to take me away from everything I loved; whatever I chose for myself was a limited time gig, because there are things you can’t get away from. Like giant, flesh-eating dragonflies that are now on fire. “Yeah,” I said, applying my torch to its head. It fell, burning, to the grass. “I’m the Final Girl.”
“Sounds good. And Thompson?”

“Yeah?”

“Welcome to roller derby.” The line went dead. I stared at my phone for a moment, wide eyed and unbelieving, before stomping out the flames spreading from the dragonfly and starting to grin uncontrollably. I wasn’t a cheerleader anymore—I might never be a cheerleader again—but that was okay. I had preserved the thing that really mattered.

I belonged to a team. As long as that was true, I could handle anything the world had to throw at me—whether or not it was on fire at the time. I was going to be okay.

Just wait and see.