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IM
An InCryptid Story
IM

by

Seanan McGuire
“Rejection is a tricky thing. On the one hand, it hurts like hell, and avoiding it is only natural. On the other hand, a life without opportunity for rejection is a life without a lot of opportunities. It seems awfully lonely to me.” –Jane Price-Harrington

A comfortably renovated basement in Portland, Oregon

Now

The phone was ringing. I moved it to my other ear, trying to pretend that I wasn’t counting the seconds until it was answered. Two seconds of ringing, followed by four seconds of silence; this was the third ring. Great-Aunt Angela had the home phone set to go to voicemail after five unanswered rings. Two more, and I would have to wait to try again until tomorrow. That was the deal: one call per day, or she wouldn’t let me call at all.

Two. Four. Five. One. Even when Sarah wasn’t really a part of my life, her numbers still wound up defining everything. I’d been noticing them more and more since she’d hurt herself. I wanted to stop, but I couldn’t. They were the only thing I had left that I could be absolutely sure would still matter to her when she came back. If she came back.

No, no, not if--when. It had to be when, because if I wasn’t, I didn’t know what I was going to do.

The phone rang for the fourth time, and then, with a merciful click, it was answered. “Hello, Arthur,” said Great-Aunt Angela, without bothering to ask who was calling. “I see you’re right on time again today. I think I could set a watch by you, if I still wore one.”

“Hi, Aunt Angela,” I said, and closed my eyes rather than keep staring up at the ceiling above my bed. It wasn’t going to give me any of the answers I needed, and right now, I just wanted to listen. “How are you today?”

“I’m fine, dear, thank you for asking. Sarah is the same as she was yesterday, which is a little better than she was last week, but still holding steady at not well enough to talk to you. You can try again tomorrow.”

“That’s what you said yesterday.” And the day before that, and the day before that, stretching out over the weeks and months since I’d received that heart-stopping phone call from Verity. Out of my entire family, Verity--who had been recovering from being shot in the stomach, and could thus have been forgiven for having other things on her mind--had been the only one to think that I might want to know that Sarah had been hurt. That she had used her telepathy in a way we had only ever theorized before, and rewritten a bunch of memories, and damaged her own mind in the process.

At the time, I’d been sick with worry and ready to jump on a plane to New York, even with Mom and Dad both telling me I couldn’t do anything to help. Great-Aunt Angela had already been there, getting ready to take Sarah back to Ohio, and she’d promised to keep me updated if I would promise not to show up on her doorstep until she gave me permission.

That was a promise that was getting harder to keep all the time. I’d had a lot of opportunity for thought since those first, frantic phone calls, and I had long since come to the conclusion that Verity had been the one to call me because she’d felt so guilty over putting Sarah in harm’s way. That was good. She should feel guilty. Sarah should never have been in that position in the first place, and if she didn’t get better soon, I honestly didn’t know how I was going to forgive either one of them.

“I know, Arthur, but it’s still the truth. I know you don’t like it. I know you want her to be getting better faster than she is. We want that too. Cuckoo physiology is strange, and there are no doctors that specialize in treating us, or medical books that detail situations like this one. Sarah is in uncharted waters right now. All we can do is try to make it as easy on her as we possibly can--and that means not pushing her to recover faster than her body and mind want her to.”
I sighed heavily, not opening my eyes. “I know, Aunt Angela. I’m just really worried about her, that’s all.”

There was a moment of silence as Aunt Angela tried to decide how to answer me. Finally, she said, very quietly, “Arthur, I need you to be prepared for the chance that this is as good as she’s going to get. I need you to accept that you may no longer be a part of her life.”

My eyes snapped open. I stared up at the ceiling, at the various posters and sketches tacked up there—and Sarah had helped me hang half of them, holding the ladder and laughing at my attempts to drive thumbtacks into the plaster—and wondered whether the pressure in my chest was ever going to let go.

“You said she was getting better.” I could barely feel my lips. I wanted to sit up. I couldn’t make myself move.

“She is getting better. Compared to where she was when she first came home, she’s made incredible strides. But better is not the same as ‘fully recovered.’ I know this isn’t what you want to hear. It isn’t what I want to say, either. I want my daughter back. I know you want your friend back. You have to…” She paused, and sighed, before saying, “You have to give her time. If anything is actually going to allow her to recover, it’s time. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Good. Thank you, Arthur. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” The phone went dead. I still kept it pressed against my ear for almost a minute, waiting for the laughter and the “Just kidding, here she is,” that I knew would never come.

My name is Arthur Harrington. My friends call me “Artie,” because that sounds less like a middle-aged dude who works on Wall Street, and more like a total nerd who spends most of his time alone in his basement. My parents weren’t so good at naming, is what I’m saying here. (I mean, it could have been worse. My big sister is named “Elsinore,” thanks to the same weird “maybe it’s a prophecy, maybe Aunt Laura just dropped a lot of acid before she disappeared” warning that saw my cousin Annie get stuck with the name “Antimony.” Having a name that ought to come with a 401k is really no big deal.)

My mom is Jane Price-Harrington, one of the latest descendants of a long line of cryptozoologists and monster-hunters. Her family spent literally centuries treating “shoot first, ask questions later, but only if you’re really bored” as a sacred commandment.

My dad was her senior project--she was studying the interaction between the human and Lilu populations in the Pacific Northwest--which sort of makes me her graduate thesis, I guess. There are days when I feel like being an incubus/human crossbreed makes me better qualified to be a front page story for The Weekly World News. “World’s Sexiest Comic Book Guy.” They’d sell a million issues, and I’d never leave my basement again. Everybody wins.

Anyway, Dad being an incubus means that I sort of got screwed if what I wanted was a life spent being left alone to draw, read comic books, get into fights on the Internet, and see every Marvel Cinematic Universe movie seventeen times in the theater without having random girls sit down next to me and start trying to share their popcorn. I got Dad’s magic “everybody wants to explore the wonderland in my pants” pheromones, but didn’t get the switch that would let me turn them off when I get nervous. Which is all the damn time when I’m around people who want to ride me like a pony before they even know my name.

(Yes, my condition is manageable, with the right regimen of charms, poultices, and meditation techniques. Which doesn’t change the fact that I have never once in my life been able to know whether a girl liked me for me, or because I am in real life what cheap colognes marketed at teenage boys are in the
Which isn’t to say that my life is all suffering and stupidity. My pheromones don’t affect people I’m actually related to by blood, which means all my relatives who like boys are safe from me. I wear a lot of the aforementioned cheap cologne to block the pheromones when I have to go out, and while I had to do a lot of breathing into paper bags and had a few close calls, I even managed to attend high school like a normal human teenager. I have the Internet, which makes socialization easier than it has any right to be. And up until recently, I had Sarah.

Sarah Zellaby, the only telepathic mathematician I need, or want, or have ever met, really, since telepaths aren’t that common—not true, mind-reading, influencing your thoughts telepaths, anyway; I’m an empath, and so’s my sister Elsie, but we don’t know what people are thinking, just what they’re feeling. She’s a cuckoo, which means her whole species is pretty much evil, like the Brood from the old X-Men comics were, back when the X-Men actually went into space on a regular basis. Sarah is…

Sarah is different. Sarah is different, just like Great-Aunt Angela is different. They may be the only two cuckoos in the world who aren’t supervillains in training, and that’s what got Sarah so messed up. She went to New York with my cousin Verity. The Covenant of St. George—more supervillains, emphasis on “villain” instead of “super”—found them, and the only way to get out alive was for Sarah to hurt herself. If Sarah had been a normal cuckoo, more interested in hurting other people than keeping them alive, she’d still be herself. Evil and malicious, but herself.

I would never have loved her if she’d been a normal cuckoo.

Maybe that would have been better.

Eventually, the silence on the phone stretched out for long enough that I had to admit that Great-Aunt Angela had hung up. I sighed and sat up, dropping the phone onto my pillow as I rolled out of the bed. One more day without Sarah. The worst part was that I wasn’t even surprised anymore. I just got on with life.

I didn’t want to get on with life. I wanted to sit next to my phone and stare at it until it magically rang and it was her on the other end. And I knew that was never going to happen, just like I knew that—when and if she finally did get better—I wasn’t going to be her first priority. I loved her, but she didn’t love me. That was the way the world was, and I had long since come to terms with it, no matter how much my cousin Annie teased me and tried to get me to ask her out. (What did Annie know, anyway? It wasn’t like she dated all that much, or dated at all. The last time she had gone out with an actual boy, she’d been in high school, and a cheerleader, and he’d been on the football team, and it had been the homecoming dance, and anyway, he wound up in therapy and trying to convince his psychiatrist that there were monsters in the woods behind the school. Which there were, but that was beside the point.)

Mechanically, I sat down at my computer and pulled up a browser, loading my email. There was nothing interesting in there, or at least nothing interesting enough to serve as a distraction. I pushed my chair back and started picking up my laundry off the basement floor. If I was going to be spending another day alone at home with my thoughts, I might as well make myself useful.

My computer beeped.

I glanced at it automatically, and saw that my IM contact list had popped up on the screen. That meant that one of my starred contacts had logged on—probably Antimony, which could mean something was about to try to eat downtown Portland or something. That was always good for a distraction. I scanned down the list, looking for her name, and felt my heart skip a beat. It wasn’t a pleasant sensation. At that specific moment in time, I found that I didn’t mind…because the second name on the list was one I
hadn’t seen for a very long time, and hadn’t been sure I was ever going to see again.

MIDWICH_GIRL

I sat back down, barely able to feel my fingers as I opened a chat window and quickly tapped out a message.

INCUBOY: HELLO?

There was no response.

I stared at the screen, willing her to answer. The window sat open in front of me, almost like an accusation, like a punishment for daring to hope that things could be changing. But her name was still on my contact list, and so I tried again, typing out a slightly longer message:

INCUBOY: SARAH, IS THAT YOU? ARE YOU THERE?

No response. I balled my hands into fists, so tight that I could feel my stubbed-off nails digging into my palms, before finally shoving myself away from the computer desk. Her system must have connected automatically for some reason, leading to my horrible moment of hope and anticipation. It was just the sort of thing the universe loved doing to me.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, and went back to picking up my laundry. I wanted to say more, but what would have been the point? There was no one there to hear me.

Over the course of the next three hours, I did two loads of laundry—wash, dry, fold, and put away, which would probably cause my mother to feign a heart attack when she got home from work and saw how much I’d done—cleaned the dishes out of my room, and put all the comic books I’d been allowing to pile up next to my bed safely into their plastic sleeves. Then I lit a few pine-scented candles to burn the smell of my pheromones out of the room, and sat down to start alphabetizing those same comics. (Incubus pheromones smell a little bit like port wine, and a little bit like overripe blackberries, and a whole lot like trouble waiting to happen. This is sort of a long way of explaining why all the clerks at Yankee Candle in the mall know me by name.)

My computer beeped periodically while I was working, but I ignored it. Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, there’s a reasonable chance the whole thing is getting thrown out of a window. That would mean carrying the computer up the basement stairs, and then I’d have to buy a new computer. It just wasn’t worth the effort.

Eventually, the last issue was safely slotted into place, leaving me with nothing more to clean. I stopped, looking first at my empty hands, and then at the dismayingly tidy room around me. I could go upstairs and continue my rampage by doing the dishes or something, or I could stop acting like the computer cared that I was sulking, Skype Annie, and see if she wanted to go kill things in World of Warcraft. I was definitely in a killing things sort of a mood. I got up, walked over to the computer, and sat down, hitting the space bar to dismiss the screen saver. Then I froze, feeling my heart skip a beat for the second time in the same day…and just like before, I really didn’t mind.

MIDWICH_GIRL: HI.

MIDWICH_GIRL: I’M SORRY I DIDN’T ANSWER EARLIER. I WAS STILL TRYING TO GET EVERYTHING BOOTED UP.

MIDWICH_GIRL: ARE YOU THERE?
The last message had come through almost fifteen minutes ago. Fifteen minutes! That’s how long she’d been waiting, thinking I didn’t care about talking to her—thinking I was ignoring her. I managed to put my fingers on the keyboard, and found that I couldn’t get them to move. They refused to obey my commands, convinced that this was some sort of cruel trick. That wasn’t something I could blame them for. The rest of me was equally sure that this was a hallucination, or a dream maybe. I could have fallen asleep while I was folding laundry. My brain could be trying to punish me for something.

Or it could be real.

I closed my eyes for a moment, swallowing hard, and finally forced my fingers to obey me.

For a moment, everything was very still. Then, at the bottom of the chat window, a message appeared:

MIDWICH_GIRL IS TYPING.

She was typing. Sarah was typing. I held my breath, watching that innocuous message flash, and waited to see whether the world was going to let me have this. I wasn’t asking for much. I was just asking for everything.

Then, with no fanfare or trumpets or any of the things that it deserved, the message disappeared, replaced by something I had been waiting to see for months.

MIDWICH_GIRL: ARTIE! YOU’RE ONLINE! I THOUGHT YOUR COMPUTER WAS LYING TO ME.

IT SORT OF WAS; I LEFT MYSELF CONNECTED WHILE I WAS CLEANING MY ROOM, I typed back, swallowing the lump in my throat. The screen was blurry. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, but didn’t get up to find a tissue. I had more important things to do. ARE YOU REALLY YOU?

MIDWICH_GIRL: I THINK I’M ME. I FEEL LIKE ME. IF I’M NOT ME, I DON’T KNOW ABOUT IT. ARE YOU YOU?

YES, I typed immediately. I AM ABSOLUTELY ME. NO ONE ELSE IS GOING TO TAKE THE JOB.

MIDWICH_GIRL: GOOD. MOM SAID YOU CALLED.

Immediately, I decided to forgive Great-Aunt Angela for everything she’d ever done, everything she ever would do, and a few things that had been done by other people.

INCUBOY: I WAS WORRIED ABOUT YOU. I WANTED TO CHECK AND SEE IF YOU WERE FEELING OKAY.

MIDWICH_GIRL: I WAS WORTH WORRYING ABOUT. I STILL AM, I GUESS. BUT I’M FEELING A LOT BETTER.

GOOD, I typed. Then, going for broke, I added, I MISSED YOU.

There was a long pause, long enough that I started to worry I had said something wrong, and she had logged off. Then, MIDWICH_GIRL IS TYPING flashed on the screen. It lasted a few seconds before it was replaced by a message:
MIDWICH_GIRL: I MISSED YOU TOO.

MIDWICH_GIRL: WHAT HAVE I MISSED?

I laughed. I couldn’t help myself, and I really didn’t want to. WELL, VERITY IS DRIVING CROSS-COUNTRY WITH HER NEW COVENANT BOYFRIEND, AND ANTIMONY’S ROLLER DERBY TEAM WENT TO THE STATE FINALS…

Sarah was in Ohio and I was in Oregon, and I didn’t know when I was going to see her again, and that didn’t matter. In that moment, it didn’t matter one bit. She was going to be okay. No matter how long that took, she was still Sarah, and she was going to be okay. She was going to come back.

Things were going to get back to normal, and all I had to do was be patient. I read comic books. I can do patient.

Smiling, I looked at the screen, and at the little message that said MIDWICH_GIRL IS TYPING, and everything was finally okay.

Finally.