

Mothers and Mimics

By C. Jade Wyton

Becky Bloom recently discovered a colony of feral mimics living just a little way into the woods in an abandoned house. So she has been going there every day to check up on them, give them water, and otherwise make sure they're healthy. Now she's begging her caretaker-turned-mother, Isa, to come with her to see the colony. And though Isa hesitates, she eventually relents and follows Becky into the woods. But, it turns out that they're not the only ones interested in the old house; that, and trying to befriend mimics often has unpredictable consequences.

Contains depictions of grieving.

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Becky had managed to sneak to the abandoned house on the Brimstone property almost every night since Friday, even with all of the scandals currently surrounding it and her.

She was nervous about people seeing her go into the woods alone, after everything. So she'd decided to go at night, instead of the day.... Probably not the safest idea, but she just couldn't *help* herself!

There was an entire colony of mimics living out there! Within walking distance of her house! She just *had* to go and visit them!

And she thought she was making at least some headway with them; even if she hadn't been able to understand a single word they said, yet.

The book-shaped mimics in the sitting room were the least skittish, probably due to their young age. They were only around the same size as Mimi was which meant, if they were a non-miniature breed (likely, given the size of the mimic that Becky thought was their mother), that they had only *just* grown out of their infant stage.... Becky guessed they were all from the same brood, and she suspected that the couch-shaped mimic that had appeared in the corner of that room on her second visit was their mother....

She'd managed to pet the couch-mimic, yesterday. Though only briefly before one of the young ones got close and the couch took a defensive stance and growled Becky away from its baby.

Becky had left the sitting room completely, then, to give the mother some space; instead focusing her attention on the oven mimic that Portia had told her about.

This one was timid but not aggressive. And it had created an *amazing* display of fake-fire with its tongue as it tried to spook Becky away— But it quickly calmed when she lay down beside it and let it approach her at its own pace. It sniffed her, then licked her, and Becky thought it was probably considering eating her when it gave her a test-nibble; so she'd scratched between its eyes (a spot most large mimics couldn't groom on their own) in order to change its mind.... It had practically melted into the floor as it received Becky's affections, and then fallen

asleep.

That was when she'd gotten up to clean the water bowls and check if the treats she'd left out had been eaten (they had).

Most of the mimics in the house didn't want to approach her. Not without some sort of temptation.... Though the most skittish mimic Becky had come across was still the one that had turned from a puddle of mould into a little girl; something Becky *still* couldn't believe she'd been blessed enough to see! A simulacri; one of the *rarest* members of the mimic family!

This mimic seemed determined to scare her away and kept taking very impressive, complex organic forms. A dead potted plant, a very large spider, and a six-legged giant rat with eyes running down its sides were only *some* of the things that it had turned into while trying to size up to the half-elf.

Becky had a feeling *this* mimic in particular was largely responsible for the rumours that lead the the building being nicknamed *the Murder House*.

That, and the ghost that lived on the top floor. But Becky didn't really care all that much about him. She'd only seen him the once, when they'd been searching for Danny Hitchcock. And he didn't seem dangerous; after all, he'd kept the child safe and hidden from the woman who'd attempted to kidnap him. That didn't seem like the sort of thing a ghost would do if it was dangerous.

No, Becky didn't think there was any reason to be scared of this ghost.... The only things in the house to be scared of were the larger mimics that weren't used to human contact, and that one part of the second story floor that was water-damaged under the carpet and looked like it would give way under her feet.

But it was alright. She knew where she couldn't walk upstairs; all she had to do was pay attention to the dust-trails. The thickest trails meant that *nothing* walked on that floor, *ever*. While the lighter dusted areas were obviously used, every week or so, as the larger mimics came out of hiding and went hunting—

'Becky, honey,' Isa's voice interrupted Becky's thoughts as the drow pet her on the shoulder. 'Are you alright? You're... staring.'

'I... was?' Becky asked, looking around to get her bearings.

She was in the lounge room of her own home with a spoon and a container of half-eaten dip in her lap. It was clear she'd been watching a DVD; though now it was stuck back on the title menu, looping the movie's theme song.

'You looked like your father when he thinks about fabric,' Isa chuckled. 'What on Earth was happening in there?'

'Uh, mimics,' Becky answered; much to Isa's amusement. 'I um... I found a colony of strays, the other day.'

'Did you?' Isa asked, seeming genuinely surprised. 'You didn't mention them, before....'

'Uh, no. I thought if I did you might stop me from visiting them,' Becky admitted, replacing the dip's lid and throwing it onto the coffee table in front of her.

'Becky—' Isa cut off with a sigh, and raised her brow at the girl. 'First, put that in the *fridge*. Second, *why* would I stop you? Is it somewhere you're not supposed to be?'

Becky bit her lip at the question, trying not to look guilty but knowing she failed when Isa crossed her arms.... So she quickly scooped up the dip again and

hurried to the kitchen in an attempt to escape her caretaker.

It didn't work, as Isa and her disapproving look simply followed Becky to the fridge.

'Becky,' Isa said in a warning tone. 'Why would I stop you?'

'Uh...' Becky paused with her head in the fridge, before slowly leaning back out and closing the door. 'Because... they're... at... the... murder... house.'

'THE MURDER HOUSE?!' Isa exclaimed, before taking a deep breath and trying to steady her voice. 'Becky.... Becky. Do *not* tell me you have been visiting the *murder house*.'

'Yaaaah,' Becky drawled. 'And uh... you're gonna like this part even less....'

'What part?'

'I've been going there at three AM?'

Isa took in a sharp breath, raising a finger— And then seemed to think better of scolding Becky, opting instead to let the heavy breath out into her balled-up fist as she turned and leant against the sink.

When Isa stood in silence for a long, long moment, Becky cleared her throat.

'Ahem... so...' Becky gave a sniff. 'I uh.... I've made some good progress with the mimics. They're starting to warm up to me! Some of them let me pet them, and most will accept food if I offer it to them....'

Becky trailed off as Isa took another deep breath.

More silence followed.

Then, Becky smacked her lips, and moved to stand next to the drow. 'Do you want to come with me and meet them?'

Isa looked up at Becky with a sceptical look.

'I think they'd like you,' Becky continued, knowing she should stop talking but finding herself completely unable to. 'You should come! It's really cool. There's so many of them, and all different types, too! You just need to be careful of the couch mimic, cos she's got a brood and is a little bit protective, but the stove mimic is pretty friendly once you get it to relax.'

'Becky—' Isa stood up straight and crossed her arms again. 'I am not *trespassing* on the Brimstone's property, just so that I can go to the *murder house* to look at *dangerous feral predators*.'

'Aw, but why not?' Becky chirped.

'Trespassing. Murder house. Dangerous predators,' Isa repeated, lifting a finger for each point. 'Also, three in the morning? No. It's a school night!'

'We can go now, before it gets dark,' Becky offered, ignoring Isa's other points. 'And be back before dinner!'

'No,' Isa said, firmly.

'Please?' Becky whined. 'Come and see the mimics!'

'I can see a mimic here, whenever I want,' Isa retorted. 'I don't need to go out and see wild animals.'

'Feral,' Becky corrected. 'They're mostly stray mimics of domestic breeds, not wild. Which makes them feral. They can be re-accumulated to people and become properly domestic, with some effort. If they were wild they could be tamed and adjust to human presence, but not redomesticated enough to be taken out of their colony and rehomed.'

'Now why couldn't you put this much effort into *math*?' Isa sighed.

‘Cos math isn’t mimics, Isa!’ Becky defended.

‘It could be,’ Isa muttered. ‘If you have sixty-seven mimics playing in a room, and two run off to hide, ten go to sleep, and four decide to sunbath, how many mimics do you have still playing?’

‘Fifty-one,’ Becky replied, not missing a beat. Then, she heard what she’d said and covered her mouth with surprise. ‘*Oh my god,*’ she breathed. ‘I just did *math.*’

Isa stared at Becky, just as surprised, before blinking and shaking her head and frowning. ‘I— Wh.... No. No. Back on topic. I’m *not* going to the murder house. End of argument.’

‘What’s the point of getting back on topic if you’re just going to *end the argument?*’ Becky whined loudly, trailing the drow as she marched out of the room. ‘*Please* Isa? Come see the mimics! They’re all so cute! If you come, I’ll do all my chores!’

‘You’re supposed to do those *anyway*,’ Isa scolded, rounding on Becky. ‘Have you not been doing them?’

‘Uh...’ Becky hesitated, realising she’d accidentally backed herself in a corner. ‘Mm... *no?*’ she answered.

Slowly, Isa closed her eyes in frustration. ‘Becky.... *I love you.*’

It didn't sound like she did, with the tone she used. Though Becky knew she meant it.

Becky bit her lip. ‘I love you too.... Please come?’

‘No.’

*‘Please?’*

‘No.’

*‘Pleeeeeease!’*

‘No.’

‘Isa. Please?’

‘No, Becky.’

'Isa. *Issaaaaaaaaa....*

‘No.’

*'Iiiiissaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.'*

‘No.’

*'Iiiiiisssssssaaaaaaaaaaaaa....'*

*No.*

‘Mmmmmm,’ Becky gave a huff, shuffling from foot to foot, before deciding to try something... *new*. ‘Please, *Mum*?’

The word didn't sound completely natural, coming out of her mouth. But it still had it's intended effect.

Isa's brow raised and she gave Becky a look. The look was half pleasant surprise, and half *you're pushing your damn luck*.

Becky had to bite her lip as she tried not to grin; though she knew she wasn't able to hold it back. She could feel the cheeky, childish look working its way to her face as Isa stared her down.

Then, Isa's face broke into her own grin and she lunged for Becky. 'Don't you "mum" me just to get what you want!' she exclaimed as Becky let out a squeal and sprinted out of the room. 'Get back here, young lady!'

Becky ran into the hall, but Isa caught her at the stairs. The drow threw her arms around the giggling half-elf and pulled her back so she could blow a raspberry into her cheek.

‘Isa! Isa, stop!’ Becky laughed, trying to wiggle out of Isa’s grip.

‘Oh, I’m Isa again, am I?’ Isa teased, pressing her lips into Becky’s cheek again. ‘I’m Isa, now you’re not trying to manipulate me!’

Becky squealed as Isa’s fingers found her sides. Then her knees buckled as she was tickled, and she crumpled to the floor in a giggling heap.

Isa let Becky slip through her grip, and leant over the girl with a wide grin. And as Becky looked up at her thought she saw happy tears in her eyes.

That was when Becky realised just *how much* hearing that word had affected Isa.

‘*Mum?*’ Becky tested again, the word somehow managing to be both strange and alien on her tongue, but also so completely correct and *real*. She could barely explain the feeling as it rolled out of her mouth; both so right and so natural, but also so, so unnatural and wrong.

When Isa looked down, Becky opened her arms for a hug. And when it was received she held tight and firm, not letting the drow go.

She felt so conflicted.

Isa was her mother.

She’d *always* been her mother. Even when she wasn’t, she was.

Becky had *always* seen her as her mother....

But the word “*mum*” just....

A part of her brain told her it was already taken.

And she didn’t want to replace her mother— Her other mother.

She *loved* her mother.

And she loved Isa.

She wanted to call Isa her mum, but she didn’t want to feel guilty about it; like she was abandoning her mother....

*Why was it all so complicated?*

‘Becky?’ Isa pulled away as Becky sighed, and brushed the girl’s hair from her eyes. ‘Are you alright?’

Becky bit her lip.

How was she supposed to even *begin* explaining the mess in her head?

The confusing, conflicting feelings that were bombarding her from all sides?

She needed to tell Isa. If she could tell *anyone* about these feelings, it was *Isa*....

Becky took a deep breath, trying to find the words to reach out. But instead, all that came out was:

‘Will you come and see the mimics with me?’

‘Becky, no,’ Isa sighed, giving Becky another brief hug before rising to her feet. ‘I have too much to do.’

‘You *always* have to much to do!’ Becky complained, rolling to stand and trailing Isa as she began to walk around the house collecting stray dishes.

‘And who’s fault is that?’ Isa said, her tone humoured as she picked up a dirty mug that sat abandoned on the lounge room floor.

‘Not mine,’ Becky whined, crossing her arms and pouting.

‘Hm.... Is this yours, or your father’s?’ Isa asked, holding the mug out to Becky.

Becky took it and gave it a sniff, smelling sweet sugar and hot chocolate, before shrugging. 'I dunno,' she lied.

Isa's lips pulled tight in a sharp, firm look, and she raised her brow. *She knew.*

'Mine,' Becky admitted quickly.

'Thought so,' Isa responded. 'Your father usually doesn't *finish* his drinks before forgetting about the mug.'

Becky sighed as Isa continued towards the kitchen and put the mug back on the floor so she could follow.

She caught up with Isa in the dining room and then, as the pair headed for the kitchen, asked again:

'Are you *sure* you don't want to come to see the mimics?'

'Sure I'm sure,' Isa replied, placing the dishes by the side of the sink and turning on the tap.

'Like, it would mean *soooo* much to me if you would come!' Becky pushed, taking Isa's arm and tugging on it childishly.

The drow turned and looked her over.

'Where's the mug?' she asked, curtly.

'What mug?' Becky asked.

'*The mug?*' Isa repeated, firmer. 'That I gave you not two minutes ago?'

*What mug was Isa talking about—*

'OH! The mug!' Becky exclaimed, turning and running back to the lounge to retrieve the cup she'd mindlessly abandoned.

She came back to Isa rolling her eyes and muttering as she scrubbed at a plate; though she smiled as Becky returned, and took the mug from her.

'So you *really* can't come?' Becky asked.

'I have too much to do,' Isa said. 'Maybe if I didn't, I could. But I'm just too busy.'

'Well...' Becky shuffled awkwardly, before gently placing the mug on the counter. 'What if I helped? Would that give you more time?'

'You don't want to do the dishes,' Isa chuckled, not looking up.

'No, but... I *will*,' said Becky. 'If it would make you happy.'

Isa paused, then, looking surprised; like she couldn't believe what Becky was offering. Then she let out a long, tired breath. 'It *would* make me happy.'

'Okay,' Becky mumbled, stepping close to Isa and looking over the sink.

'How.... What do I do?'

'Gloves,' Isa said, motioning to the cupboard. 'And a scrubber.'

'Alright!' Becky said, retrieving a pair of gloves and a scrubbing brush from under the sink. 'So dishes, and then we can go see the mimics together?'

'I have to make your father his dinner, Becky.'

'Dishes, cooking, *then* the mimics?' Becky tried.

Another deep, deep breath, and Becky could see Isa starting to relent.

'Dishes, cooking,' Isa said, slowly. 'Then you fold your washing.... *Then* we can go see the mimics.'

'Deal!' Becky chirped, stretching a glove as she pulled it on— And accidentally flicking it into the bridge of her nose.

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‘God, dishes are *gross!*’ Becky complained, pushing past a branch and holding it aside for Isa. ‘I swear I can *still* smell the water!’

‘They wouldn’t be so gross if you rinsed them straight away,’ Isa observed playfully, stepping over a large stick and making her way to Becky’s side. She ruffled the girl’s hair before pecking a kiss on the top of her head. ‘I’ve spoilt you, I think.’

‘No,’ Becky argued with a cheeky grin. She ducked away from Isa quickly and motioned sideways. ‘The house is just over here. I think. I’m like, pretty sure it is— This place looks *really* different during the day.’

‘Mm,’ Isa gave a tentative hum as she followed Becky through more brush. ‘I don’t like it when you come out in the woods at night, you know.’

‘It’s fine,’ Becky waved a dismissive hand, before coming to the clearing where the house was. ‘Hah! We’re here! Look at it, isn’t it great?’

The look on Isa’s face told Becky she *didn’t* agree it was great; but she didn’t say so. Instead, she looked around the yard, her brow furrowing, and pointed to a mound of disturbed dirt.

‘Has someone been here?’ she asked.

‘Oh, yeah, I think so,’ Becky shrugged, and headed for the house’s front door. ‘Things have been like, moving around a lot. And not from like, the mimics. I think it’s cos people know this is where Danny was found, so they’re all trying to get a look at the house now and stuff.’

Isa took a long, loud breath through her nose, and it was clear she was concerned.

‘It’s fine though!’ Becky quickly reassured, pushing open the door and heading inside. ‘The mimics aren’t like, super upset by it or anything. So whoever’s been coming in hasn’t been like, mean to them. So I don’t think I’m in any danger or anything.... At least not while I’m here. Maybe like, in other places. I dunno, I think Helena still might be mad or possessed or whatever. So like, not *completely* safe. But that’s more likely to be a problem like, in town and stuff. Where there’s a lot of open space for the crows.’

‘Hmm,’ Isa gave another hum and cautiously followed Becky inside. ‘Oh, my god. This place is falling apart! It *can’t* be safe in here.’

‘It’s fine!’ Becky dismissed, hurrying towards the dining room. ‘Come on! There’s one mimic that I think is *really* close to a breakthrough!’

Isa followed, though she was obviously reluctant to, until they stood together in a dilapidated dining room.

‘That’s the one,’ Becky said, motioning to a chair that was just *slightly* larger than all the others. ‘Very timid and keeps up the disguise most of the time, but it sniffed me, yesterday. So I’m going to see if I can get it to eat something....’

‘Is that safe?’ Isa asked, sounding worried.

‘Uhhh...’ Becky didn’t want to lie— But she also didn’t want to say yes.... So instead, she just gave a shrug and handed Isa her jacket. ‘Here, hold this.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t want it getting dirty.’

‘Dirty? Becky what do you mean—’

Before Isa could finish her question, Becky was clambering down to sit on the

floor. She scooted towards the chair until she was only about two meters away from it; then flopped over onto her side.

‘Becky—’

‘*Shh...*’ Becky hushed, gently. ‘It’s looking at me.... I think I can get through to it.’

‘*Becky...*’ Isa gave a sigh, though she didn’t say anything else as Becky began to make a low cooing sound.

‘*Brrr! Baby! Trrr!*’ Becky did her best impersonation of a mimic that she could, and began to roll on the floor, stretching herself out like a sunbathing cat. ‘*Hey baby! Trrr! I’m friendly! Brrr!*’

She caught a glance at Isa as she rolled; the drow looked thoroughly confused and unimpressed— But then she saw the mimic, which had very, very slowly begun to take a step towards her, and she knew that it was working.

‘*Brrp!*’ she trilled, rolling again and reaching out a hand to the creature as it approached her. ‘*Trrr! Trrr!*’

‘*Grrnnnp,*’ the large mimic moaned in response, pausing to sniff her before taking a step back.

‘*No, no,*’ Becky whispered, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a large cut of chicken jerky. ‘*Brrp! Food! Trrr! Yum!*’

She held the jerky out to the mimic; which sniffed at the air and gave another groan, but didn’t move.

‘*Trrr! Yummy!*’ Becky trilled, pulling the jerky back and sinking her teeth into it. She heard Isa give a quiet gasp and a sigh, but chose to ignore the drow as she chewed on the jerky’s edge. ‘*Mm! Trrr! Food!*’

She could see the exact moment the mimic realised that she had food, and watched as a large glob of drool rolled out from under its cushion and onto the floor.

‘*Yeah, you want some?*’ she asked sweetly, holding out the jerky again. ‘*Yum yum!*’

The chair sniffed at the air again before taking the step back towards Becky and opening its mouth.

Slowly, it reached out its long tongue, wrapping it around Becky’s hand and slurping up the jerky; very careful not to bite her.

‘*Good baby,*’ Becky whispered as it accepted the food and stepped back. ‘*What a good baby you are.*’

The mimic ate it quickly, before cautiously approaching Becky again. It pressed against her now-empty hand and gave a groan as Becky began to scratch under its chin.

‘*Good baby,*’ Becky cooed. ‘*Good baby! Such a good baby.*’

The mimic gave a low purr before snuffling at Becky’s hair. Then it backed away to retake its spot in its hiding place at the table.

‘*See Isa? I told you that I was getting through to it!*’ Becky chirped, looking up to Isa— And seeing several people standing, staring, behind the woman. ‘*Oh, hi there!*’

Becky’s chirped caused Isa to whirl around and jump in surprise. ‘*OH my gods!*’ Isa exclaimed, putting a hand over her heart. ‘*Oh, oh....*’

‘*Ah, I’m so sorry! So sorry,*’ one of the people, an older human woman, quickly

motioned for Isa to stay calm. 'We didn't mean to frighten you; it was just... *fascinating* how she handled that mimic! I was so nervous. I thought it was going to take her whole arm off, the way it wrapped its tongue around her!'

For a moment Isa stared. Then she nodded and let out a breath. 'I thought so, too.... But, uh, she has a way with mimics....'

'Yes, that was clear,' said one of the human's companions; a *very* old looking dragonborn. 'Very interesting, the way she copied a young mimic's cries.... Clever.'

Clever? Becky hesitated, before rolling to her feet and brushing herself down. Nobody ever called her *clever*.

'Yes,' said the human. 'What ever made you think to do that?'

'Oh, well... you can't just talk to them like you can a pet mimic, because they're not used to people,' Becky explained, making her way over to the group. She could see clearly that there were three more people with the human and the dragonborn; a gnome, a tabaxi, and another elf.... 'So, like. Because they don't see people a lot, they don't know any commands, or what certain words mean. So you have to try and communicate in a way *they* understand, you know? Laying down so they know you're not going to pounce on them, making affectionate noises, communal feeding.... It's, like, *you know?*'

'Hmm, yes, I think I do,' the human grinned, before offering Becky her hand. 'Kira Charmeical, I'm with the Shadow Oaks Historical Society. We all are. This is Cobediah,' she motioned to the dragonborn. And then, to the elf, tabaxi, and gnome in turn. 'Vivian, Sandwich, and Jakoby.... We, uh, weren't expecting to see anyone else here. Did the Brimstones send you?'

Isa pursed her lips then, and cast a glance to Becky. 'We're—'

'We're *technically* trespassing,' Becky answered honestly, causing Isa to rub her brow in frustration. 'But it's like, okay and stuff. Cos I know some of the Brimstones and, like, Angelo is like my friend and I don't think he'd mind me coming here. I think his biggest issue is that, like, if I get hurt, he's gonna have to comfort Jareth and stuff. Cos— Like. Jareth is my boyfriend, and Angelo and him are like, really good friends. You know?'

'I can't say I do,' Kira answered, smiling warmly. 'I'm not familiar with either of them.'

Isa let out another heavy breath, at that, and casually crossed her arms. 'So you're with the historian society? That's interesting. Did the Brimstones hire you, or...?'

'Ah!' it was Jakoby who spoke, now; hurrying over to Isa's side. 'They gave us permission to study and preserve the house and surrounding area— Wonderful piece of history! Can't believe some of the things we've found!'

'What kind of things *have* you found?' asked Becky.

'A large variety,' Vivian with a grin. 'Old bottles, bird bones, broken kitchenware—'

'Spoons,' interrupted Jakoby.

'Yes, lots of spoons,' Vivian said, seemingly unbothered by the interjection. 'We also found a chest of gold— The old currency, gold. We returned it to the Brimstones, of course. As it's technically their money.'

'Whoa, how much was there?' Becky asked.

‘*Becky!*’ Isa gave a hushed hiss. ‘*Don’t ask that sort of—*’
‘Five-hundred coins,’ was the answer. ‘Worth a little under ten-thousand in today’s money.’

‘Wow!’ Becky exclaimed. ‘That’s like, a lot, isn’t it?’

Vivian gave a nod.

‘I’m sorry, but... your name is *Becky*?’ Sandwich cocked his head and raised his pointer finger. ‘Becky, as in... Becky Bloom?’

‘Yeah, that’s me!’

‘AH!’ Sandwich’s hands clapped together loudly— And the mimic gave a low groan that made the entire room flinch and pause for a moment in silence. ‘*Ah,*’ he repeated, quieter. ‘My nephew —Baloney— he told me about you. You helped him get away from those crows, the other day!’

‘Oh, Baloney!’ Becky felt herself break into a wide grin. ‘He’s so nice! I like him. He’s in class with my friend, Malinka. She’s a wizard, too. And a tabaxi. And her parents are Russian—’

‘Becky,’ Isa’s hands found Becky’s shoulders, then, and gave them a gentle squeeze. ‘You’re over-sharing again.’

‘Oh, sorry,’ Becky bit her lip. ‘I didn’t mean to. I do that, sometimes....’

‘No, no, it’s fine! I just wanted to thank you for helping him,’ Sandwich chuckled. Then, he grew sombre. ‘I saw the video of what those animals did. I don’t know how our family would have coped if anything happened to Baloney....’

‘Oh, yeah, well, helping him was like, the least I could do!’ Becky said, shrugging. ‘Baloney helped me out before when I like, needed help. So I couldn’t just do nothing, you know? And I mean. Even if he *hadn’t* helped me before, it was still the right thing to do, right?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Sandwich said, giving a solemn nod. ‘But using yourself as bait—’

Becky made a motion for Sandwich to stop talking— But it was too late.

Isa’s hands squeezed Becky’s shoulder’s tight as the drow’s entire body tensed, and Becky flinched when she raised her voice.

‘You did *WHAT?*!’

‘Uh...’ Becky tried to duck away from Isa; but the drow held her firm. ‘I may have... used myself... as a distraction... for the crows... so that Baloney and his friend Mesmire could, like... get into Wendy’s house without getting killed?’

Isa looked faint, at that. Faint enough that both Vivian and Kira rushed to her side, hands outstretched and ready to catch her.

‘Becky—’ she cut off, and leant against the door frame. ‘Oh, my god. You’re going to be the death of me.’

‘That’s... why I didn’t tell you,’ Becky admitted, blushing. ‘Because I knew it would freak you out. And it seemed like there were too many other things for you to be worried about already, so....’

‘I need to sit down,’ Isa managed, weaving through the historians. She made her way to the front of the house, heading out the door, and sat herself on the porch steps with a heavy sigh. ‘*Gods....*’

Becky hung back, just for a moment, before hurrying after Isa and sitting down beside her.

Neither of them said anything.... But after a moment, Isa took Becky’s hand,

and Becky rested her head on Isa's shoulder.

'Well...' Cobediah gave a cough as he and his companions slipped past the girls and down into the yard. 'We have to get back to our work, but you're more than welcome to stay and watch, if you'd like.'

'Oh, okay,' Becky gave a grin. 'Thanks.'

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It had been almost an hour since Isa and Becky had met the historians. They had been allowed to sit and watch them work. And, though Isa had stood up and wandered around a bit, more interested in the spiders that had made their homes along the outer walls of the house; Becky had never felt so curious in her entire *life!*

They were digging up a spot they said was the old outhouse.

*The toilet!*

It was unbelievably strange and funny.

They were digging up the toilet, looking for old garbage— And they were finding it!

Kira had explained it all to Becky, when she'd asked why they would want to look for things under a toilet, that the outhouse of houses like this were used as general waste disposals. Not *just* toilets.

That fact had amazed Becky. She never would have guessed that on her own!

She figured it was like how people would put things down the toilet now to hide them— Like the one time she'd gotten ahold of a cigarette and almost smoked it, only for Isa to come in to collect the dirty washing and for Becky to panic and flush it....

'Ah! Another piece of the bowl!' Jakoby called with excitement, carefully holding up a piece of shattered ceramic. 'Put it with the others, Sandwich!'

The tabaxi didn't waste any time accepting the treasure from the gnome, and hurried over to the table by the porch to put it in the padded box that contained the rest of the bowl.

He then turned to head back to Jakoby, passing by Cobediah as he did— And Becky noticed Cobediah was carrying a *very* strange machine.

It was a long stick, with a large flat circular base that he held near the ground, and a cord wrapping around it all the way to the top where a phone-shaped screen sat, crackling with static in uneven intervals.

It was so fascinating that Becky couldn't help but stand up and make her way over.

She trailed the old man curiously, not saying a word as he ran the device over the ground— Until he turned and eyed her with a grin.

'You look like you have a question?'

'Yeah! I do— What *is* that?' Becky asked, pointing to the long stick.

'Ah, this old thing? This is a metal detector!' he answered cheerfully.

'What's it do?'

'It detects metal,' was the very simple answer.

'Oh,' Becky realised immediately that the answer should have been obvious, and felt herself blushing— But then, to her surprise, Cobediah continued as if her

question had been completely normal. He didn't bat an eye at how *stupid* she'd been, and simply held out the metal detector and motioned to it, seemingly just excited that she had shown any sort of interest in it at all.

'Things likes old tin cans, and coins— *Ahh*,' he paused to think, tapping his chin. 'Wire. Bottle caps. And recently we found some spoons.'

'Whoa... so like, it just knows the metal is there? How does that work?'

'Well, the detector emits an electromagnetic field, and that energises any metallic objects in the ground,' Cobediah began. 'This energisation causes them to transmit their own electromagnetic field, back to the detector....'

Becky tried to listen, but soon she found she was completely lost, and only understood *half* of the words Cobediah was saying. Words like "this" and "the" mainly. And "ground" and "fork." But that was about it....

'You look lost,' Cobediah said, pausing. 'Where did I lose you?'

Becky bit her lip, not wanting to admit it was only about three words into his explanation that she started to get confused.

'Ah,' he breathed, slowly. 'Well.... Hm.... Let me think of a simpler way to word it.... The detector sends out an energy wave that talks to the metal, and the metal talks back.'

'Oh,' Becky felt her ears flick up curiously. 'Metal can talk?'

'In a way,' Cobediah grinned, seeing he'd regained Becky's attention, and shifted to show her the detector's screen as he ran the device over the ground. 'Metal talks with electric waves of energy. That's what I meant by "electromagnetic," before.'

'Oooh...' Becky gave a nod. 'So it's, like, how my phone talks to other phones! With electricity and stuff coming out of it.'

'Yes, in a way,' Cobediah nodded, pulling a metal pen out of his pocket and throwing it to the ground. 'And then, when the metal talks to the detector, the detector talks to us.'

He ran the detector over the pen, and it gave a beep— And Becky gave an excited squeal and clapped her hands.

She saw Isa turn, out of the corner of her eye, and Becky quickly motioned for her to come over.

'Isa! Isa! Come look!' Becky exclaimed. 'Oh, my gods. That's like. Amazing! So like. Metal has this electronic-magnetic thingy. And so do phones— What else has it?'

'*Everything* has its own kind of electromagnetic field,' Cobediah explained, retrieving his pen. 'Why— Even *you* have one! Just not the right sort to talk to the detector.'

'So like... I'm magnetic?'

'Technically, yes, but not strong enough to actually affect anything around you.'

'Wow!' Becky clapped her hands again, before glancing to Isa as she stepped up beside her. 'You're so smart! You're like my friend Adam's dads! They're like, doctors and scientists and stuff! They *made* Adam!'

'Ah, you mean the Frankensteins?' Cobediah grinned. 'Yes.... I'd wager that boy of theirs would probably set off the detector, what with his bolts and wiring.'

'Aw, wow, he *would*!' Becky exclaimed. 'Cos he's like, got lots of metal and stuff inside him! *Wow*. Is that.... Is that how smoke detectors work, too?'

‘It depends on the brand. There are different types that work differently,’ Cobediah said. ‘Some some detectors have a light and a sensor inside them, so if smoke gets inside it and blocks the light from the sensor, it goes off.’

‘Whoa,’ Becky breathed. ‘Cool!’

‘Very cool,’ Isa agreed, resting her hands on Becky’s shoulder’s and pulling the girl close for a hug. ‘Have you been having fun?’

‘Yeah!’ Becky answered. ‘The work they’re doing is *awesome!* Like. They’re all so smart and know so much! And like, they can tell an entire thing about someone from just, like, some old fabric! It’s *so cool!*’

All the the historians within earshot perked up at the compliment. Then they grinned to each other, glowing with pride as Becky continued to explain to Isa everything she’d learnt so far.

‘Interesting,’ Isa chuckled. ‘Though, we should be heading home, soon. We weren’t supposed to be gone this long; your father will be getting worried.’

‘Okay! I just have a few more questions?’

At the mention of more questions, the historians all began to converge towards Becky; obviously eager to help answer whatever the girl wanted to know.

‘Alright,’ Isa laughed, pecking a kiss on Becky’s cheek and making for the front porch again. ‘Ten more minutes, then we go?’

‘Okay!’ Becky nodded. ‘Ten minutes!’

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It had been thirty minutes, and Becky had *tried* to be conscious of the time— But she just had too much to ask! And every answer she got just gave her even *more* questions than before!

Luckily, Isa hadn’t seemed to fussed about the time. She’d come to stand by Becky again, at some point, and commented it was nice to see her so excited about learning....

‘So, like, when was this house built?’ Becky asked.

‘Well, it was originally built in the seventeen-hundreds, back during the colonial area,’ Vivian said. ‘There’s some evidence of renovations, but it’s mostly surface-level.’

‘Whoa,’ Becky blinked, looking the house over in awe. ‘So it’s at least, like, forty years old!’

‘Three hundred years, more like,’ Cobediah corrected.

‘Oh *wow!*’ Becky exclaimed. ‘That’s like, *so old*. Older than my dad!’

That comment earned a laugh from Isa.

‘Yes, well, we *do* specialise in old things,’ Vivian chuckled.

‘Yeah.... *Ah...* I’m sorry,’ Becky felt herself blushing. ‘I must seem *really* dumb to all of you, asking all these stupid questions....’

‘No, not at all!’ was the response. ‘Curiosity is a virtuous trait! If nobody ever asked any questions, we’d never know *anything!* And we’d never progress, as a society. Things that seem simple to us now were unheard of just a hundred years ago! And it’s all because people asked *questions.*’

‘She’s right!’ Jakoby shouted from the outhouse hole.

Becky grinned at that.

The way these people spoke; it was different. Not like school. She felt like she might actually *remember* the things they were telling her.... For once in her life she felt like the information going in one ear *wasn't* flying straight out the other!

'So, like, in another three hundred years, will people be like, doing this sort of thing to the houses people live in now?' Becky asked.

'Most likely, yes.'

'Cool! Should I like, bury stuff for them to find? Or is that like, not good to do?'

'Ah!' Jakoby popped out of his hole and scurried over. 'That, my dear, is called a "time capsule," and finding one is like discovering a *goldmine*!'

'Time capsule?' Becky cocked her head. 'I.... I don't know what that is— Sorry. I'm... I'm dumb.'

'Oh, now, no! Who told you that?' Kira tutted.

'Uh, a lot of people, I guess. I've never been smart.'

'I'm sure that's not true,' Sandwich reassured. 'You seem *very* bright and curious.'

'I dunno,' Becky shrugged, averting her gaze. 'I'm trying, but it's really hard....'

'But you're *trying*,' Vivian gave a warm smile and gently lifted Becky's chin with a finger. 'Which means you'll get there. So don't worry, and take your time. Everyone learns at a different pace.'

Becky smiled, at that, and nodded. Then, she turned to Isa. 'We should probably go, right Isa? We were meant to leave a while ago. Sorry I got distracted!'

'It's alright, I'm just happy to see you happy,' Isa chuckled, lovingly wrapping an arm around Becky. 'Do you have everything?'

'Yep!' Becky chirped, then cast a glance back to the historians. 'Thank you for talking to me and stuff! Will you be here tomorrow?'

'Yes, and you're more than welcome to join us!'

'Oh, my gods, yes! I *totally* will!'

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By the time the two women got home it was beginning to get dark.

Ken was sitting on the front step, looking longingly down the street until he saw the girls and perked up, leaping to his feet and ushering them inside and talking non-stop. It reminded Becky of her neighbour's dog in the window, waiting for its owners to come home from work. Only taller.

He asked how their outing was and Becky launched into her own excited ramble about the mimics and the historians. Her father listened intently; though his face went through a journey as Becky mentioned the outhouse and all of the treasures they'd dug up from its hole.

'You didn't... touch anything from there, did you?'

'I did!' Becky exclaimed. 'But like, they made me wear gloves when I did, cos it was all so fragile.'

'Ah...' Ken gave a very, very slow nod. 'Because it was... *fragile*....'

'Oh, it wasn't *gross* or anything,' Becky reassured. 'It was fun!'

'You should have seen her,' Isa said, warmly, leaning over to peck a kiss on Ken's cheek. 'She was so happy.... It was good to see.'

Becky felt her heart clench with anxiety as she watched her father return Isa's kiss; their lips touching together gently. She felt the very sudden, very strong urge to run upstairs and lock herself in the bathroom to hide— And she wasn't completely sure why.

It should have made her happy to see them together... but instead it made her nervous.

*What if something went wrong? What would happen then?*

Isa looked up then and met Becky's eye, and it was clear she understood exactly what Becky was feeling.

'Honey, come here,' she said, opening her arm for a hug.

Becky stepped into the embrace, which was joined by her father, and felt herself relaxing.

Then skittering sounded on the stairs, followed by happy chirping.

'MAMA! MAMA!' Mimi's voice cried, trailing through the house towards the lounge. 'MAMA'S HOME! MAMA! HELLO MAMA!'

'Mimi!' Becky called back, breaking away from the hug and turning to the doorway just in time to see a pink jewellery chest on spider legs come scampering into the room. 'Come here, baby! Come here! I love you!'

'MAMA!' Mimi cried, running full speed towards Becky and leaping into her arms.

'Hello!' Becky greeted, not bothering to even *try* to dodge Mimi's tongue as it slobbered all over her face. 'Hello, baby!'

'Mama stinks!' Mimi chirped. '*Stinks like mimics! Mimics that are not Mimi! Mama brought home boyfriend for Mimi?*'

Becky laughed, then. 'No, I didn't get you a boyfriend. I was out at a special house, that had a lot of feral mimics in it. That's all.'

Mimi made a loud gurgling fart noise deep in its throat before it began to rub itself against Becky; transforming into a scarf so it could slither over every inch of her. '*Then Mimi will scent Mama! So Mama doesn't smell like strangers!*'

'Ah!' Becky let out a squeal and a giggle as Mimi's slithering tickled her. 'Mimi, it's alright! I'm going to have a shower! You don't need to scent me!'

'Mimi must!' Mimi declared. '*So that all know that Mama is Mimi's mama! Yes, yes, yes! Scent, scent. Mimi will scent you!*'

Becky giggled again, and scooped her mimic up. 'Young lady!' she scolded playfully. 'You know better than to scent me! I'm the one in charge, here! *I* should be scenting *you*!'

Mimi let out a cheerful coo and stuck out its tongue.

'You better be behaving yourself, you little brat,' Isa chuckled, reaching out and gently scratching at Mimi's chin before picking up the creature. 'Come on. It's time you had your dinner, isn't it?'

'Dinner! Dinner!' Mimi chirped as it was carried towards the kitchen. '*Eat! Mimi will eat! Mimi wants pork!*'

'Mimi wants pork!' Becky repeated quickly, so that Isa knew what to feed the mimic. 'There should be some left at the back of the fridge from last night!'

'Got it!' Isa called back, vanishing into the other room.

Then, Becky and Ken found themselves left alone, standing in awkward silence.... And Becky realised this was the first time they had been left alone

together for a while....

*Since before Friday.*

'So...' Becky started, rocking on her heels and swinging her arms back and forth. 'Um.... How have you been?'

'Fine,' Ken replied, shyly. 'Uh....'

'Mm....'

'So....'

'Sooo...' Becky took a deep breath. 'Isa, huh? You like her. You like... kissing her.'

Ken's cheeks went bright pink, and he looked away. 'Mhm.'

'That's... *nice*,' Becky said, her voice breaking in a squeak. 'Isa's really nice. I like Isa. And you like Isa, too.... But in a different way, to the way I like Isa.... I like Isa like a mum and... you like Isa... like....'

'Yes,' Ken answered, rubbing the back of his neck.

'So it... like... works out?' Becky managed. 'I guess? Cos, you're my dad. And you like Isa. And Isa's like my mum. And she likes you... and... it's.... *Yeaah*.'

'*Becky...*' Ken hesitated, letting out a heavy breath. 'You're *really* alright with this? I know you said you were before but.... You just seem... uncomfortable with it.'

'It's weird,' Becky answered, honestly. 'But it's not like... bad or anything. Just like. When you come home and the furniture's been moved around or something? It's like that. Everything is still there. And it's like, it's all still good. But it's different, and it's very suddenly different, and you need to like... get used to it again and stuff.... You know what I mean?'

'Yes,' Ken's lips twitched into a tired smile and he took his glasses off to clean them. 'I *do* know exactly what you mean.... I was married to your mother. You know how she was with the furniture.'

Becky gave a nervous chuckle. 'Yeah, she was.... I miss her.'

'Me too,' sighed Ken. 'Hm....'

'Mm....'

The pair fell into silence for another long, long, *long* moment before Becky rubbed her arm.

'I have like. A question? Or... statement? Feeling?' she tested; continuing only after Ken gave her an encouraging nod. 'About Mum. And Isa. And.... It's... um.... I want to call Isa my mum. But. It feels like I'm doing something wrong when I do. Like.... She's my mum. You know? She's always looked after me, and stuff. But like... *calling* her that feels like I'm like.... Like I'm trying to replace Mum, or something. And it makes me feel kinds bad.'

Ken looked down at Becky, his brow furrowed in worry and his lips tight— And Becky knew immediately that he understood *exactly* what she meant.

'You feel like that too?' she asked, relaxing when he nodded.

'Sometimes,' he said. 'The guilt... it's... hard. But... you haven't done anything wrong. You know that, right?'

'Yeah,' Becky gave a nod. 'I do.'

'Good.'

'Yeah.'

'Yes....'



More awkward silence.

Then, Ken cleared his throat. 'Becky?'

'Yeah, Dad?'

'I love you.'

Becky felt herself smiling, then, and she wrapped her arms around her father tightly. 'I love you, too.'

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Becky had stayed in the shower until the water had gone cold; something she very very rarely got away with.

Usually Isa would come in and tell her not to waste the water. But she mustn't have noticed Becky taking her time today.

Becky knew she should have gotten out ages ago, but she was having too much fun. Mimi had pushed into the bathroom and begun licking the glass door, demanding Becky open it and let it in, so Becky had given it the command, *go bed*. But Mimi hadn't followed it. Instead, Mimi had done something it rarely did and used its sticky, spider-like legs to climb the wall and come into the shower from the top; landing on Becky's head while trying to attack the stream of water.

So Becky had taken the shower head off its hook and played with Mimi like it was a laser pointer until she felt the water at her feet go cold. Mimi had leapt away and up the wall, then, complaining the water wasn't fun anymore and instead stealing Becky's towel off the hook and running into the hall with it.

By the time Becky got it back, she was almost completely dry. So she rubbed the towel into the few places that needed it, then gotten dressed and headed for the stairs.

Mimi bolted past her as she went down. Then Mimi came back up, then went back down.

'*Mama! Mama! Play! Play! Play with Mimi!*' Mimi chirped, rushing through the hall into the lounge— And then going very strangely quiet.

'Mimi?' Becky called after the mimic. 'Are you alright?'

The mimic came skittering back into the hall, much slower than before, and began to shuffle on its long legs before whining and running back through the archway.

'*Isa!*' it cried. '*Isa's sad! Isa's very sad!*'

Isa was sad? Becky quickened her pace, coming into the lounge room just in time to see Isa shooing Mimi off her chest.

'Go on, down,' Isa sighed; the drop in her voice *very* noticeable. 'I don't want licks. Not now, girl. Later— *Later....* Thank you. Good girl.'

'Isa?' Becky asked, flinching when Isa jumped and hurriedly wiped her eyes. 'Are you alright?'

'Yes, I'm fine,' Isa sniffed, settling back down on the couch and resting her head on the arm of the chair. She wasn't wearing her sunglasses, which was rare— And it also made the red, puffy marks around her eyes very noticeable.

'You don't seem fine,' Becky said as she made her way over to Isa and, without thinking, climbed into her lap and lay over her; her head resting on the drow's chest as they wrapped their arms around each other. 'Have you been crying?'

‘A little bit,’ Isa answered.

‘Why?’

‘Your uh... your father told me what you said,’ Isa explained. ‘About your mother? And how you feel like.... Well. I don’t think he worded it very well.’

‘Oh...’ Becky felt her heart sinking. *She didn’t think he was going to tell Isa that.* She should have asked him not to.... ‘Where... is he now? He didn’t stay to comfort you?’

‘He did, but you know him. Silver tongue, always thinks everything through, never says the wrong thing...’ Isa sniffed, her sarcasm losing its bite as her chest heaved in a half-sob. ‘I asked him to give me a moment alone. Though I think I’ve had about three....’

‘Oh....’

‘Yeah,’ Isa sniffed again, and moved a hand to stop Mimi climbing up the side of the couch. ‘Down, girl. Down.... Go play.’

‘*But Isa is sad!*’ Mimi gave a sharp trill. ‘*Mimi cannot play! Not when Isa is sad!*’

‘Go play,’ Isa repeated. ‘Go... find the rubber steak.’

‘*Rubber steak?*’ Mimi gave a curious chirp, and took a step back. ‘*Isa wants the rubber steak?*’

‘Go find it,’ Isa told it, wiping her eyes again. ‘It’s hidden. Go sniff it out. Go on.’

‘*Mama? Mimi goes hunting?*’ Mimi looked up to Becky curiously, asking for permission— And then let out a determined chirp and bounced in a circle when Becky nodded. ‘*Mimi will find the steak! And then Mimi will share with Isa! And Isa will be happy! Yes! Yes! Mimi will come back victorious!*’

‘Good girl,’ Isa told it as it ran out of the room. Then she wiped her eyes again and let out a deep breath. ‘Ugh. I’m sorry, Becky. You shouldn’t have to see me like this.’

Becky’s grip around Isa tightened, and she buried her face into the woman. ‘I’m sorry,’ Becky mumbled. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you....’

‘No, honey, it’s not your fault,’ Isa comforted, pressing a kiss into the top of Becky’s head. ‘You haven’t done anything wrong.’

‘I don’t know *why* I feel like this,’ Becky admitted. ‘It’s just... weird. But I don’t want it to be.’

‘Becky—’ Isa gave a sigh. ‘It’s okay; you don’t have to call me anything that you’re not comfortable calling me. Ever. Okay?’

‘No— I *want* to call you my mum!’ Becky exclaimed. ‘I *want* to! More than *anything*! It’s just... hard. Because of Mum, and stuff....’

‘I know,’ Isa said, softly, running her fingers through Becky’s still-damp hair and gently untangling the knots. ‘It’s hard for all of us, isn’t it? Even after so long, it still hurts so much....’

‘Yeah,’ Becky agreed. ‘It sucks.... And you’re right. We *all* lost her.... I lost my mum. And Dad lost his wife. And you lost your sister.’

‘Sister?’ Isa paused, and Becky felt her heart start to beat faster. ‘What? What do you mean— *Sister?*’

‘Um... yeah?’ Becky felt herself tensing as she gripped Isa tighter. ‘Mum used to say that you were like a sister to her. She said you were strong, like her. And that she loved you even when you didn’t get along.... Like a sister. That’s what she

used to tell me.'

Isa took a long, trembling breath, and Becky wondered if she'd said the wrong thing... but then the drow gave a sniff and a laugh, brushing the hair from Becky's eyes as she did.

'I had no idea she thought of me like that,' Isa said. 'That explains so much....'

Becky wasn't sure what else to say; but she could feel that Isa had stopped crying, so she lay gently against the woman and just... listened to her heart as it returned to a normal pace.

She wasn't sure how long passed before Isa finally spoke.

'You're such a good daughter,' Isa said, pecking another kiss against Becky's head. 'That's okay to call you, right? My daughter?'

'Yeah,' Becky grinned. 'You can call me that.'

Becky received another kiss and let a giggle escape her as the drow pushed her up so they could sit side-by-side.

Hm....

Wait....

Drow.

Isa was a....

'Hey, Isa?' Becky started. 'You're a drow, right?'

Isa scoffed a laugh. 'Last time I checked, *yes*.'

'And you're from the Underdark?' Becky asked. 'Like, you lived there before coming here, right? You've said that before.'

'Yes,' Isa gave a nod, her brow furrowing in confusion. 'Why?'

'What's the drow word for mother?'

There was a long, quiet pause as Isa stared at Becky; her jaw dropped in surprise.

Then, before she could answer, the silence was cut into by the sound of a loud squeaking toy and the skittering of Mimi as it hurried down the stairs.

'*FOUND THE STEAK!*' Mimi cried loudly as it rushed into the room. '*MIMI HAS THE STEAK FOR ISA!*'

The mimic ran into the room at full speed, leaping into Isa's lap and winding her as it dropped the spit-covered steak onto her.

'Ugh! Mimi!' Isa gasped, trying to catch her breath as the creature climbed over her stomach. 'Gentle! Be gentle, girl!'

'*Mimi is sorry!*' Mimi gave a trill, and leaped back to the floor; making itself small and settling down obediently. '*Mimi got excited. Because Mimi wants Isa to stop being sad. But— YES! Isa is not crying anymore! Isa is not sad!*' Mimi observed. '*Mimi made Isa happy! Mimi is a good girl!*'

'Yes, you are,' Becky replied. 'A very good girl.'

'*Mimi will go play now,*' Mimi decided. '*Mimi loves Mama! And Mimi loves Isa!*'

'We love you, too,' Becky said, petting Mimi on the head before the creature skittered away and out of the room. Then, after Mimi had left, Becky she grimaced and looked back at Isa. 'Are you alright?'

'*Mmhm...*' Isa managed. 'She's heavier than she looks....'

'Yeah,' Becky rubbed at the back of her head and chuckled. 'She's put on some weight.'

‘Hm...’ a heavy sigh, and Isa shuffled to get comfortable; picking up the toy and giving it a tentative squeak. ‘So.... The drow word for mother? You want to know.... You want to call me....’

‘If you like the word, yeah. I would,’ Becky nodded. ‘Because, like, the reason it’s hard is because “mum” was like, Mum’s *name*. At least to me it was. Like I call Dad “dad” and stuff.... So when I call you “mum” it feels like I’m using Mum’s *name* for you, which is really weird. But, if there’s another word I can use that means the same thing, then it might not be so weird. Like how Adam calls one dad Dad, and the other dad Pops. You know?’

Isa gave a very slow nod. Then, she smiled.

‘Ilhar.’

‘What?’

‘The drow word for mother is ilhar,’ Isa said, her eyes sparkling.

‘Ilhar,’ Becky repeated slowly, looking at her hands and swallowing. It felt *amazing* to say that word.

‘Ilhar,’ Isa said again; correcting her pronunciation. ‘*Ilhar.*’

‘Ilhar,’ Becky tried again. Then, she looked up to Isa just in time to see a tear escape the corner of her eye.

The drow hurriedly wiped it away with a sniff, and then made to fix her hair. ‘Well,’ she said, her voice trembling. ‘That’s, uh.... Good. Good job.’

‘Ilhar,’ Becky repeated again, grinning widely. ‘You’re my ilhar, Isa.’

The drow had to cover her mouth to smother the noise she made.

‘Isa, I love you—’

‘MAMA DID GET MIMI A BOYFRIEND!’

Mimi’s momentarily loud screech cut Becky off, and Becky sat in shock, feeling her eyes go wide as Mimi’s words slowly sunk in.

‘Is she alright?!’ Isa exclaimed. ‘What did she say—’

Becky leapt to her feet and ran towards the joyful chirping that filled the house; all the way to the back of the house, where Mimi was scampering back and forth, her tongue running over the locked sliding door that led to the backyard.

It was near-impossible for Becky to see outside with the bright reflection in the glass, so she switched off the light and jumped when she saw what Mimi was excited about.

It was a lawn flamingo. A very faded-looking lawn flamingo with large, red eyes that took up most of its head and a huge, toothy mouth ripping across its belly.

It stood trembling and pressed face-first into the glass where Mimi licked; thick globs of drool oozing from its maw onto the pavement below it as it panted so heavily it fogged the glass.

‘*Pretty!*’ it huffed. ‘*Pretty pink! Pretty pink friend! Pretty! Love! Pretty pink! Pretty pink friend! Play! Play! Love! Pretty pink! Love! Love the pretty pink! Very pretty pink!*’

‘*Lick! Lick! Lick!*’ Mimi responded, licking the door so aggressively it fell over. ‘*Handsome! Lick the handsome mimic! Yes! Mimi will lick the handsome mimic! And the handsome mimic will be Mimi’s boyfriend!*’

‘Oh, no...’ Becky breathed as Isa caught up to her.

‘What is— Ah...’ Isa took in a sharp breath. ‘Is that one of the mimics from....’

‘From the murder house?’ Becky finished. ‘Yeah.... I think it is.... It must have—’

It must have followed us home! I didn't even see it— I don't recognise it at all. It's a different breed from the others— I think it's a miniature? The only other ones I saw that size at the house were, like, juvenile.... But this one's an adult— It mustn't have come out of hiding while we were at the house.'

'Ooh... it's uh... is it okay?'

'I *think* so?' Becky bit her lip. 'I can hear it speaking. It's not being aggressive or anything, it's.... Ooh....'

'What? What's it saying?'

'Uh...' Becky paused to listen.

'*Pretty pink,*' the flamingo gave a snort that Becky could only liken to an excited pug, before it began to bob up and down in a *very* familiar dance. '*The pretty pink one is interested in me! The pretty pink will be my mate! Yes. We will have children. Me and the pretty pink one will! Many children! Many broods. Together! Us! Companions and mates!*'

'*Boyfriend!*' Mimi responded, shivering across its entire body before beginning its own bobbing motion; which only caused the flamingo to grow more excited.

'It's... flirting,' Becky answered. 'With Mimi. And she's flirting back.'

'Should we... shoo it away?'

'I... don't know,' Becky answered, honestly. 'I don't want to? Like. It's dark outside. And it's *really* small.... Look— It's already got some marks on it. I think it's hurt....' Becky edged closer to the glass, trying not to scare the mimic but desperate for a better look.

As she approached, it stepped back and pressed itself down, giving a submissive whine and making itself look as small as possible.

'*Ooh, big!*' it squeaked. '*Big alpha! Please don't bite! I'm good. I'm friendly. I'm small.... I just want to know the pretty pink one better.... Very pretty pink.... Please don't bite me.... Please.... No biting....*'

'Yeah. It's definitely been getting picked on by the other mimics,' Becky sighed. 'That's probably why it didn't come out before.... *Pspsp, shh*, it's okay,' Becky gave a coo and, holding Mimi back with one hand, slid the door open *just* enough to fit her other hand through. She rubbed her thumb and forefinger together gently and held it out for the creature to sniff... though, it didn't approach her, and instead backed away a step.

'Becky, I don't think you should—'

'Hold Mimi,' Becky ordered, softly. 'I want to make sure none of those bites are infected....'

'Hmm,' Isa gave a disapproving hum, but did as she was told and picked up Mimi. 'Stay,' she said, firmly; holding the creature tight against her chest. 'Don't wiggle— Good girl. Very good girl.'

'*Oh, the pretty pink one is in trouble with the alphas!*' the flamingo whined. '*Because of me! Oh, no! No! I am a bad mate already! Oh, no!*'

'*Mama is bringing Mimi's boyfriend inside!*' Mimi chirped, vibrating with excitement. '*Yes! Yes! Boyfriend! Mama will pick up Mimi's boyfriend! And then Mama will bring Mimi's boyfriend inside! And then Mimi's boyfriend will belong to Mimi forever!*'

'*Mama?*' the flamingo gave a timid coo. '*You are the pretty pink one's mother? Is that why you are also pink? Yes... that makes sense.... That makes sense....*'

Slowly, the mimic began to approach Becky. It sniffed at her hand, its snuffly breath warm on her fingers, before giving her a submissive lick.

'Please don't bite me,' it begged. 'I am a good omega. I am very obedient. I do as I am told. I eat last. I promise....'

'Good boy,' Becky said softly, running a finger along the mimic's long flamingo neck. Then, she leant forward, reaching to the creature's back end with her other hand and gently cupping its underside so she could lift it up. 'Come on. Come here....'

As Becky picked up the mimic it gave a pitiful half-gurgle and went completely limp in her hands; practically melting like goo as she pulled it inside.

'Please don't hurt me,' it whined. 'I don't fight. I'm very small. Small omega. And you're the big alpha! I don't fight. I won't bite. I won't bite you. Please don't bite me. I am good. I'm a good omega. You are the alpha. I know! I know you are in charge. Please, don't prove it.'

'Good boy,' Becky repeated, pressing the mimic against her chest to try and make it feel more stable as she examined it. 'Such a good boy, aren't you? Staying so still for me. Yeah.... Good boy.'

'Boyfriend is inside,' Mimi chirped. 'Boyfriend belongs to Mimi, now.'

'I can't see any infection...' Becky muttered, casting a glance up at Isa. 'He's very clean, even for a mimic. He must groom a lot.... Probably because he keeps being bitten, actually....'

Isa let out a sigh and adjusted her grip on Mimi as it tried to break out of her arms. 'What do you want to do with him?'

'I don't think we should keep him inside, tonight,' Becky said. 'He's too nervous. He might lash out at us. Or try and mate with Mimi.... And he might hurt himself if we lock him in the bathroom or the carrier.... Um.... So I think I'm going to have to put him back outside, for now. But I'll give him some water. And some mince.... And one of Mimi's old beds. That should keep him comfortable.'

'No! No!' Mimi gurgled; its upset cries making the flamingo mimic start to tremble and wiggle. 'Mama! Don't put Mimi's boyfriend back outside! Keep Mimi's boyfriend inside! Let Mimi have him! Let Mimi keep him!'

'Mimi, no,' Becky said, so firmly both mimics froze completely still. 'Behave yourself.... Okay, boy. I'm going to put you back down, now. But you were very, very good. Such a good boy.'

'Good? An alpha says I was good?' the mimic gave a purr as Becky replaced it outside. She gave it a gentle pat down its back as it reformed into a solid mass. Then it scabbled up and began to dance excitedly on its two long, false-metal legs. 'Oooh.... Oh. I like it here. I like it here a lot! Alphas that don't bite, and a pretty pink mate.... I shall never leave! This is where I live now. Yes. Yes. I love it here! I love it! This is my home! Yes! I will make a nest.... A nest! YES!'

Before Becky had the chance to respond, the mimic gave a loud, happy cry and bolted across the yard towards the shed.

'A NEST!'

—END—

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