

Tinted Fire

Memoirs of a Saved Soul



A NOVEL BY ANYA TENNEY

Tinted Fire
Memoirs of a Saved Soul
By Anya Tenney

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons,

living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2014 Anya Tenney

All rights reserved.

First Edition.

Illustrated by Anya Tenney

tintedfire.com



CHAPTER ONE: FEARLESS

The chill of the morning air was biting lightly at my cheeks, but I only quickened my pace. The sky was slowly turning pink from the rising sun and I realized that if I wanted to catch the sunrise, I had to hurry. I knew every feature of the road for I had walked there many times. I hadn't climbed that side of the mountain since the start of my second year of university; however, that morning I felt a strong desire—a need to go on the little journey once again.

Ever since I moved to Miessa with my father eight years ago, my love for the new country and people had grown stronger each day. It wasn't an easy adjustment for me as I was a young boy leaving everything behind. Luckily, I already knew the language; my father was born in Miessa and he had spoken Varavian to me ever since I was little. In fact, I slowly started to forget French; I had to read books in order not to lose grasp of it completely.

The small provincial town, concealed from the unsophisticated traveler, was well known throughout the country as one of the best resort towns. Surrounded by forbidding cloud-topped mountains, scoured streaked cliffs, and thick evergreen forests, Miessa had become the perfect paradise escape for those seeking a quiet place to take

a break from their everyday problems and enjoy the beauty of nature in its full bloom.

I was almost at the top when I leaned against a pine tree to catch my breath. I could see the white tops of the snow-covered mountains in the distance. The tree's bark was illuminated by the early rays of the rising sun and seemed to glow bright orange. It was extremely quiet and only my deep breathing and the occasional chirping of birds broke the sacred silence. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air that filled my lungs. When I opened my eyes and looked ahead, I saw a flying insect of an unusual red color about ten meters away. It was flying up, as if leading my way. The abnormal looking thing, which reminded me of a butterfly, appeared and disappeared as if it were a mirage. Such a strange apparition made me gape for a couple of seconds before I regained my senses. Intrigued by the unexpected visitor, I pushed myself from the tree and hurried onward, attempting to catch a second glimpse of the little intruder.

When I finally reached the top, the light of the sun hit my eyes, causing me to squint and block it with my hand. To my surprise, there, on the edge of the cliff from where I loved to observe the valley and the mighty mountains, stood a person. After my eyes had adjusted to the blinding light, I concluded that

the silhouette belonged to a young man. He was tall, lean, and had blonde hair that the wind was playfully ruffling. Before I could react or continue to analyze the situation, the stranger turned around and smiled at me without the slightest hint of surprise on his face.

Though he didn't look dangerous, it made me feel uneasy. I was sure he wasn't local and, if I had to guess, I would say he wasn't even from Varavia. I was desperately trying to fight that voice in my head that was screaming for me to get away from there, but I stood without shifting my eyes from the stranger for a second. Maybe because of seeing my poor attempts at putting on a brave face, the man's smile grew even wider, and he took a step in my direction.

The second he took off his sunglasses, revealing his aquamarine eyes, I couldn't move. There was something hypnotizing in his gaze that made me forget all about the fear. His movements were very graceful and full of elegance. If he were a fictional character, he would be a noble lord of some far away country, with a brilliant smile and a dozen or two exhilarating stories to tell.

"Good morning, young man," said the stranger, coming closer to me and extending his hand. "My name is Alrik Lanternarius. You can call

me Al.”

“Yue Dubois,” I said politely, before shaking his hand. His hand was soft, which surprised me.

He must be noble for sure, I thought.

“Oh, what an interesting name you have. Well, I'm very pleased to meet you, Yue,” said Alrik, looking deeper into my eyes as he took my hand in both of his.

“The pleasure is mine, Al,” I said, allowing myself to use language that was more informal after seeing that we were around the same age; though, he did look slightly older than I was. At that point, I was able to take a closer look at my new acquaintance. His shiny blonde hair hung slightly over his shoulders with long bangs curling upwards. I must add that he was not bad looking and that he had a face that women fancied. He was wearing what looked like some ethnic clothing, which in itself wasn't so unusual for a resort town like ours. What struck my interest though was the style itself, with which I was not familiar.

His white shirt was neatly tucked into his pants and was made of a material that looked like linen. His sleeves reached almost to his fingertips and had slits that went all the way up his inner arm, which allowed him to hide or reveal his arms at his wish. The edges of the shirt were hand decorated

with fine needlework. Over the top of the shirt, he wore a sleeveless crimson coat, richly decorated with semi-precious stones and sable fur, which had a symbol of a sun embroidered on the back. His pants were made of fabric similar to the coat and were tucked into boots that reached his knees.

"Do you like my attire?" Al asked, looking playfully at me. I knew he must have caught me examining him, which was not very polite on my part. I shifted my gaze away from the smiling man, ashamed.

"Don't worry about it. You must think I look bizarre," he said, releasing my hand from the prolonged handshake.

"No, that is not what I had in mind," I said with a little too much emotion in my voice. After a pause, I continued in a calmer manner, "I just have never seen this particular design before, so I was curious. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. I'm not offended at all," Al reassured and smiled at me. I let out a breath and smiled back at him for the first time, feeling like the tension between us was gone.

"So, do you come here often?" he asked after a pause, before he shifted his gaze to the rising sun. I watched how his eyes sparkled from the dazzling light, which made him squint. I followed him and

turned my head in the direction of the daystar. The view was breathtaking; the sun was rising from behind the rocky, snow-covered mountains, waking nature from its sleep and shining in all its glory. The morning mist-covered valley had turned golden, but slowly the mist was disappearing, revealing more and more trees that were standing tall and proud.

"Not lately, but I used to come here often when I was younger. It is my favorite place. It might not have the views that other parts of town have, but it is the most peaceful place of all," I said, looking up at the sky.

"Yeah," said Al with deep nostalgia in his voice. It made me curious.

"Have you been here before?" I inquired. On second thought, I added, "If you don't mind me asking."

"No, I don't mind. I grew up here. Over there," said Alrik, pointing at the forest located a few kilometers away from us, in front of which was a little abandoned hut. "We used to go with my dad. He taught me many things in that forest..."

I looked at Al. His face was no longer playful but rather sad, which was reflected in the way he talked. Not wanting to pry, I decided to change the subject.

"So you grew up here? That's great! I moved

here only about eight years ago but you might know some of my friends," I said, trying to cheer him up. However, he only smiled at me sadly.

"I don't think so, dear Yue. It is very unlikely that anyone I played with here as a kid will remember me," Al said, turning away from the blinding sun. I didn't understand the reason behind his certainty. If it were I, for example, I would have never forgotten him. I had a good memory of events and people. However, I didn't feel like arguing with him about it, even though I felt like he was wrong. Instead, I turned around as well and was about to catch up to him when suddenly, before I could do so, he spun around and took a quick picture of me with a small red camera that had been hanging on his wrist the whole time. He caught me completely off guard, but without waiting for the most obvious question, he said, "I wasn't able to take a picture of the sunrise before so I decided to do it now. I hope you don't mind." He directed a smile at me.

"No, not really," I mumbled. I couldn't find anything better to say in response as we continued on our way back down the mountain, with me taking the lead.

"May I ask why you rushed to get up here so desperately? I heard your heavy breathing, and the leaves rustling a minute before you actually arrived,"

said Al in a velvety tone, returning to his usual manner of speaking. "Were you that eager to catch the sunrise?"

I felt embarrassed for who knows what number of times in the last fifteen minutes. I usually pay no mind to such things, but the comments coming from Alrik, the man I had just met, made me feel lost as to what to say and what to do. There was something special about him, something I couldn't see or touch, but it was there. I could only feel it. The air of power that was all around him was as calm as it was strong.

"Did I really make so much noise?" I said, trying to hide my embarrassment with a small laugh.

"Not really. I might have exaggerated a tiny bit," responded Al, as he continued to climb down.

"Oh," I said, looking down at my feet, trying to watch my step along the narrow road we were taking. "It was silly, really. I thought I saw a butterfly, and I wanted to get a better look so I rushed after it. Then I saw you and completely forgot about it."

After a few steps, I noticed that my fellow traveler had stopped. I turned around and looked up at Al, puzzled. It was hard to see his face because the sun was right behind his head making his light hair look like a halo, but I tried to read his expression. The look that was there was a serious, cold one.

"A butterfly? You saw a butterfly? What color was it?" he asked in a smooth voice, but I was able to pick up a small trace of nervousness behind it. That observation made me even more confused.

Why would he care about such an unimportant thing?

"Um, I only saw it for a split second but I think it was bright red," I answered as I looked up at him; his figure was rising above me even more because of the slope. But, no matter how much I looked, I couldn't guess what he was thinking. At that moment, I realized how quiet it was. Only the rustling of the trees was breaking the blood-chilling silence. Once again, I found myself in a worrying situation.

Suddenly, a red spark in my new friend's eyes caught my attention. Confusion and panic interlaced each other in my throat, making it hard to breathe. However, in the next moment, the scarlet sparkles were gone; the eyes of my newest friend returned to their usual color. I rubbed my eyes involuntarily.

It couldn't have been another mirage, could it? I wondered.

No, deep down I did not believe it was just a coincidence. I was simply too naïve and shortsighted to admit it. On the other hand, perhaps, it was just

the easiest way of dealing with the situation. Maybe, if I pretended the problem wasn't there, it would resolve itself. What wishful thinking!

When I again looked up at Al, he seemed to be looking behind me. I turned around, but I didn't see anything there.

"What is going on, Al?" I asked without trying to hide the rising panic in my voice. "Is there something on my shoulder?" Al seemed to come out of his trance and looked straight into my eyes. The gaze was magnetizing and luring.

"Yes and no. There was something, but I don't see it anymore," said Al. After seeing my worried expression, he added, "Don't worry. You see, I just like to collect butterflies and that red one you were talking about might be a very rare kind I was looking for."

"Oh," was all I could muster.

I let out the deep breath that I was holding the whole time and relaxed my shoulders while closing my eyes. Whether it was a logical explanation or a gifted lie, the words somewhat calmed me down, and we continued on our way.

We talked the whole time and Alrik turned out to be a great conversationalist, which didn't surprise me. He asked me many questions about what was going on in Miessa and what had

changed. He asked me about my hobbies and things I liked. Nevertheless, it surprised me that he never mentioned anything that people usually ask at first.

For example, when meeting new people they usually ask you about your age, what you do for a living, where you go to school and what your major is, or if you have brothers or sisters. Those are the most common and understandable questions that come to people's minds. However, Alrik didn't ask me any of those things. The only thing I told him was my name, and it looked like that was enough. Then again, he was probably right. Why should he ask unnecessary questions to a person he might never meet again?

When we reached an old temple, I took out my cell phone and checked if I had service. Two tiny lines confirmed that I was within range. It was already fifteen minutes to seven, and I needed to hurry back home to pick up Kaien if we wanted to make it for the first class on time.

As if reading my thoughts, Alrik put his sunglasses back on and said, "If you are late for somewhere I wouldn't dare take more of your time."

"Oh, no, it is nothing. I was just checking for missed calls. That's all," I said and put my phone back in my pocket. From the temple, there was only one way down, which involved descending four

hundred and thirty-five steps. Along the steps were many small souvenir shops, family-owned restaurants, small convenience stores, and other kinds of shops to satisfy the daily needs of the locals and tourists that came to our town.

It was still early, but the life inside the shops was in full swing. In one shop, there was a cut glassware shopkeeper polishing his glasses; in another shop, a woman was wiping the floor, preparing for a new workday. I felt the amazing smell of fresh bread coming from my favorite bakery. As we passed it, I spotted my friend Rina helping her grandma with the shop. Our eyes met, and I bowed politely. She bowed slightly in return before looking curiously at Alrik, which didn't go unnoticed by him as he looked at her and waved. Even through the glass, I was able to see how red she became.

"Who is that cute brunette? A friend of yours?" Al asked, as we continued walking down the steps.

"Rina? Yes, she is. I know her and her sister well."

"I see," was all Al said and we spent the rest of the way in a comfortable silence. When we reached the end of the steps, a clear view of Miessa opened in front of our eyes—a small town that was built in a highland surrounded by the mountains. In its center,

there were a few tall buildings with a more modern look but none of them was higher than five stories. Those were the hospital, school, and government buildings, without which any town would be doomed. Right across from us, about ten kilometers away, was another mountain with an almost identical set of steps leading up. Even though I couldn't see them because of the trees, I knew they were there.

On the North Mountain stood an old wooden mansion, which was once owned by a noble lord who had also owned the land of Miessa a long time ago. It was hundreds of years old and had gone through many renovations, though retaining its historic look. A few decades ago, it was turned into one of the most expensive and sumptuous guesthouses in Miessa, which my father then obtained. Our house was located not far from there, just a little way down the mountain, but I was still able to see it.

I suddenly remembered about university and searched for my car.

"What inn are you staying at? I can give you a ride," I proposed, but he shook his head slightly.

"Thank you for your offer but I would like to take a walk. You go ahead," he said.

I must confess, I didn't fully understand

why, but I was slightly disappointed.

My life was very measured and monotonous. One might call it boring but I did not think so. That was the way I liked it. Even so, from time to time I wished for something exciting to happen. I was familiar with the expression 'be careful what you wish for', but I never realized the true extent of the phrase. Moreover, there he was. The wind of change I was so thirsty for was standing right in front of me. Of course, at the time, I didn't know how ruthless and merciless that wind would be or how much destruction it would cause. Oh, the charm of youth.

Alrik looked at me for a long moment, noticing my distant expression. There was sympathy in the smile he gave me as he came closer. He touched my shoulder lightly and whispered.

"No worries. I will see you later, Yue Dubois."



CHAPTER TWO: HARMLESS

With his final words said, Alrik walked off along the

stone-paved sidewalk until his white figure disappeared behind the curve.

"I will see you later, Yue Dubois," Al's voice echoed in my head.

The loud ring of my cell phone brought me from my wandering thoughts. I suddenly remembered where I was and that I was late. I answered the call, bringing the phone to my ear while I got the car keys from my pocket.

"Good morning, Kai," I said, while opening the door of my black Mitsubishi.

"Good morning?! Where are you, Yue? I went to your house and Fransa said you left before dawn and hadn't come back yet. Your cell phone was off and I had no idea—" jabbered Kaien without a pause.

"Calm down, Kai. I just went for a walk," I interrupted him calmly as I sat in my car.

"Did you go to the sunrise spot?"

"Yeah, I did," I answered as I checked my rearview mirror.

"You haven't gone there in a while, huh? By any chance, did you meet that blonde guy on your way back or something?" asked Kaien matter-of-factly.

How did he...oh, that's right.

"Did you already call Rina? Jeez, I can't

believe you," I said, as I started up the engine.

"But I was so worried," murmured Kaien in a plaintive voice. I could almost see the innocent face he often made so that I would not be angry with him. Surprisingly, it worked and I smiled at my old friend's silly childish antics. No matter how old we got, he always knew how to make me laugh.

"Listen, I'll tell you all about it on the way to school and you can lecture me to your heart's content but now I'm going home. Are you still there?" I said, as I drove from my parking spot.

"Sure am!" exclaimed Kai in a very cheerful voice that was completely different from the one he was previously using. *That rascal!*

"Ok, I'll see you in about ten minutes then," I said and then added, "And don't eat all of my breakfast, please." After some light joking and laughter, I hung up and stepped on the gas.

I parked the car in front of my house and got out. The house was two stories high with two symmetrical extensions that were slightly forward on each side. The center section had a veranda with tall white wooden columns. Right above it, we had a balcony, which my father's room and mine shared. However, because he was hardly ever home, only I used it. The facade was painted sand yellow, the roof was pine green, and the window frames and railings

were white. In front was a big yard with an evergreen lawn. Tall trees surrounded the house but didn't hide it from view.

The whole house still kept the same appeal as hundreds of years ago when it served as a home for lords of that land. It went through many renovations, especially on the inside, but the floor plan as well as the historical style was left unchanged. I suppose they left it because it was one of Miessa's historical monuments. To tell you the truth, I was never enthusiastic about living in a house with such a rich history. In my opinion, historic places should be left in peace. Nevertheless, over time I got used to the squeak of the old stairs, the tall ceilings, the narrow hallway on the second floor, and the ballroom, now a spacious living room, with its intricate oak parquet.

On the other hand, I could never complain about the view. It was as if the whole valley was in the palm of my hand. The only other place that could compete for a better view was the great mansion itself. The second best feature in my opinion was the cherry orchard that came with the house. They called it "The Weeping Orchard" because there were many old weeping cherry trees growing there. They say it also belonged to the lord who had owned the place and that he had ordered that it be planted, for which I

was truthfully grateful. The orchard was magnificent, especially during the time of the year when the cherry trees began to bloom. In that season, it would be opened to the public and many people would come to enjoy the view of the beautiful pink flowers, along with their delicate aroma.

I looked around one more time, enjoying the view in front of my eyes as I moved to the door. Before I could even touch the handle, the door opened. I stepped inside and looked to my right.

“Good morning, Master Yue,” said the good-natured woman’s voice. I looked at our housekeeper, Madam Fransa, and smiled.

“Fransa, how many times have I told you to call me Yue?” I asked. She didn't say anything at first. Instead, she helped me to take off my coat. After putting it away in the closet by the front door, she said, “Apparently, not enough.”

Fransa was a strict looking woman, who might remind some people of their old math teacher. I would never dare to guess, or even worse, to ask a mature woman her age, but I had an opinion in the matter, judging by her gray hair and many facial wrinkles. She was always calm and collected and nothing ever went unnoticed by her. However, in spite of her stern look, she was a kind-hearted woman. I learned a long time ago not to judge people

by their appearance.

"The breakfast is waiting for you in the kitchen," she reported.

"Thanks," I said, before heading to the kitchen. I added mostly to myself, "I will try to eat what is left of it by now."

When I entered the kitchen, I saw that Kai was sitting on a bar chair and, free of any worries, happily eating my omelet. Without warning, I quickly took the fork from him, which held the last piece, and put it in my mouth. His indigo eyes looked up at me in protest at first, but then after seeing my expression he smiled widely.

His black hair, with a tint of blue that shone on the sun, was in its usual style. When we were younger, Kai had been crazy about some band, the name of which I couldn't recall, and so he had cut his hair to mimic the band's soloist. I didn't understand why he liked one section of his hair on one side to be longer than the rest, but it grew on me to the point where I could not imagine him without it. Besides, it would be hypocritical of me, with my overly grown bangs that covered most of my left eye, to judge him. Tan olive-colored skin created a nice contrast to his deep blue eyes making them stand out even more, besides them being of such an unusual color. They reminded me of a sapphire: they seemed so dark but

when the light hit them, you could see how deep the color truly was.

Kaien was taller than I was and much more muscular, mainly because he worked out every day to keep his body in good shape. He was wearing a long sleeved military style jacket with many pockets all over it, a t-shirt, and a pair of honey colored jeans. His neck and wrists had many chains and other kinds of jewelry, without which he rarely went out, heaven knows why.

“Oh, it's you. Finally came back,” said Kai. He was smiling at me as if nothing had happened. I knew it was useless to point out the fact that my breakfast was gone, so instead I went for the vase of fruit that was standing on the counter and took an apple.

“Obviously, I wasn't fast enough,” I said, unable to suppress the caustic remark. Kaien only laughed and lay on the table, placing his face against the cold granite countertop. His smashed cheek made him look very comical and I let out a small chuckle.

“Come on, lazy cat, we are going to be late for class. You know how our math teacher is,” I rebuked, before biting into my juicy apple.

Kai looked up at me without moving a millimeter and mumbled, “What's the difference? We are going to be late anyway.”

Kai closed his eyes and yawned once. I knew he woke up early as usual, but we seriously had to go. I took his bag from the counter and with a swift motion handed it to him, causing him to jump in surprise.

"If you want to sleep, do it in your bed or during the lecture, but either way get moving," I commanded and headed towards the exit.

"So energetic so early in the morning," murmured Kaien behind me as I marched to the front door where Fransa was standing with my bag in her hands.

"Thanks, Fransa. We will be leaving," I said, before taking the bag.

"Thanks, Fransa. Your omelet had a divine taste no other can compete with. You are a wonderful cook," praised Kai.

"Please leave your complements to the girls your age, young Roux," Fransa responded with a bored expression. Kai would never let it go. He took his pride in beguiling women.

"My dear Fransa, one day I will warm your heart. I know that deep down you like me dearly despite your coldness," persuaded Kai as he came closer and made a dramatic pose by putting his hand over his heart. The woman only raised her eyebrows ever so slightly but said nothing. I rolled my eyes at

the scene.

“Come on, Romeo.” I pulled him by his jacket. Once outside, Kaien shouted something else to Fransa after which she shut the door with more force than needed. I started the engine and waited for Kai to get in.

“Let's go,” said Kai, smiling as he got comfortable in the seat next to mine. I moved the car from its parking spot and drove down the street.

Unfortunately, we were late for math and our professor made us stand through the whole lecture. It was not a pleasant experience to say the least, especially for Kaien who seemed to be mastering a new skill of sleeping while standing, which was somewhat fascinating.

The mansion my father owned was probably ten times bigger than my house, but they looked similar. The biggest difference was the size and the richness of the decorations. In truth, all the wood carving that decorated the inside and outside of the dwelling was astonishing; some were abstract or floral patterns but some were miniature scenes from local legends and old myths. The side of the mansion that was facing the town had a big pond and on sunny days, the reflection of the sun penetrated inside, creating a water reflection on the tall white

ceilings of the rooms.

As soon as we got inside, we changed to our uniforms, which also happened to be Varavia's national costumes. My costume consisted of a pair of simple beige pants and white shirt with a lace-up front. On top, I wore a coral-colored jacket, which was made of a much thicker fabric, and went all the way to my knees. Split in six pieces from my waist down, each section was decorated with glass beads, which created some abstract patterns. There was no need for shoes, as we weren't allowed to wear them inside the great mansion. The guests were offered a pair of slippers while the employees wore socks. Kai had the same costume as I did, but his jacket was bright blue with a white motif on it.

My duty as the owner's son was to check on our guests to ensure that they had everything they needed. Kai just wanted to stick around so he got a part time job at the museum that was on the first floor. That was killing two birds with one stone: he was able to spend his endless energy on constructive labor and earn some extra cash.

After leaving Kai at the museum, I went to my father's office to look through some papers and to see who moved in and who left this week. I greeted Claire, our manager, and began my work. It was not my favorite part, but I knew that it needed to be done

and that my father counted on me to do it. I opened a new file with many numbers and took the list of our guests, scanning the names quickly: Tomas Beqiri, Alexander Leitner, George Jensen, Mori Virtanen, Fiona Schneider, Serge Papp, Jin Russo, Antonio Hoxha, and Olivia Van Leeuwen. Eight names corresponding to the eight rooms that we had. Deep down, I felt disappointed because Alrik's name wasn't there. Maybe Kai was right and I was just making things up. I sighed and stood. It was time to greet the guests. I took the notepad and left the room.

It turned out to be a long round because one nice old lady insisted on my coming inside and listening to her stories about the time she was young and spent her family vacations in Miessa. It was interesting to hear her stories and see how the town had changed, but I had to leave.

"Thank you Mrs. Van Leeuwen for staying at our house. We deeply appreciate it," I said bowing to her politely. The old woman laughed softly.

"I'm sorry for keeping you for so long," she apologized, touching my arm in an apologetic gesture.

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. Van Leeuwen. Please, enjoy your stay," I said and smiled at the openhearted woman.

"What a polite boy," she said and smiled.

I bowed again and left. I was getting tired, but I had one more room left. Room number eight was on the top fourth floor and was the most expensive room we had. While climbing the wooden staircase I looked at the list again: Alexander Leitner, prepaid for three months. My eyes widened at that. Usually people stayed there for a couple of days or weeks, but months? It was the first time I had seen it. I finally arrived at the top and looked around. The fourth floor was always deserted. The only daylight sources were two small windows on my right and left that were twenty meters away from me. The dark wood floors and maroon wallpaper made it seem even darker. The weak yellow light of a lamp illuminated the number eight.

I knocked on the door and waited. A moment later, I heard approaching footsteps and the door started to open. I was about to open my mouth and say the usual lines, but the words stuck in my throat. I must have looked very amusing then, like a mute goldfish. In front of me, leaning on the door, stood a person whose silhouette was far too familiar. He was dressed quite casually in a gray pair of jeans and a stylish black dress shirt and was holding a cup of tea. He was smiling at me as if he knew what I was thinking.

"Alrik?"



CHAPTER THREE: NAMELESS

“Surprised to see me?” he asked in his unique manner of speaking. Strong sunlight was coming from the big window behind him, making it hard to see his face yet again.

“Yeah. That was really unexpected... Wait! Where is Mr. Leitner?” I remembered after recovering from the shock.

“You are looking at him,” Al responded simply.

“What? But I thought your name was Alrik, Alrik Lanternarius. Am I wrong?” I asked, perplexed.

“No, Yue, you are right. They are both my names. However, the one I told you is the one I was born with,” explained the tall man.

It seemed like the more I found out about him, the more complicated he got. I looked at the name again: Alexander Leitner. The initials were the same as with Alrik Lanternarius: A.L. It made sense, but it didn't explain why he had more than one name.

“You look troubled. Don't worry. There is nothing criminal. Now, why don't you come in?” he proposed, opening the door further. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go inside and get the answers to my growing number of questions, but my common sense was against such an idea. Luckily, I didn't have to decide because I heard Kaien's voice calling

me from behind.

"Hey Yue, are you there?" called my friend as he climbed the stairs. I turned and saw his figure appearing. His white pants clearly stood out in the poorly lit hallway.

"Hey Kai. I want you to meet Alr...I mean Al. The one I was telling you about," I introduced Al as Kaien approached the door. The loud sound of china breaking caused me to look back in Al's direction quickly. There, on the wooden floor was a broken cup and spilt tea with Al standing over it. His face was as pale as if he had seen a ghost. I was lost at what to think. I looked back at Kai, but he seemed even more confused than I was.

"Hey, are you alright?" asked Kai stepping forward. Alrik looked at me, then back at Kai, and started laughing nervously. It started quietly but grew louder. I noticed that his hand trembled and it looked like he had experienced a nervous breakdown.

"Kai, please go get some water," I ordered, stepping inside the room.

"No, no. I'm fine. Please, forgive me," said Alrik in-between laughter. "It was so rude of me."

"Are you sure you're ok?" asked Kai again, still looking worried.

"Yeah. It's fine. I'm Al," the blond man

reassured, before he extended his hand for a handshake.

“Kaïen Roux.”

“Well, nice to meet you, Kaïen. I'm Al. Please, come in,” said Al ushering us inside.

“So the minute he said his name you knew who he was?” asked Kaïen loudly.

“That's right. The owner of this mansion is Victor Dubois. I knew he had a son that worked here. I put two and two together,” explained Al, putting down a fresh cup of tea on the coffee table.

We were sitting in Al's living room on a black couch with golden painted decor. It was upholstered with silver striped fabric and so was the chair that Al was sitting on. There was celestial blue wallpaper on the walls and a flower patterned carpet on the hardwood floor. On the walls, there were many antique golden sconces as well as a chandelier of an impressive size hanging from the center of the room, which was higher by a few meters than the rest of the ceiling. To my left there was a window with a view of the whole town. The sun was setting and I couldn't help but look at it. It wasn't every day that I got the chance to enjoy such a spectacular view.

"Ha! That's cunning. Did you hear that?" asked Kai and pushed me with his elbow. I tore my gaze from the window and looked at Al.

"Yeah. It makes sense," I confessed quietly.

"But what's the deal with your names? Are you from the mafia or are you some secret agent?" Kai asked curiously. I couldn't believe that he had just said that.

"Kai," I hissed at him. No matter who Al was, he was our guest.

"What?" he asked innocently. We both turned our heads to look at Al, who was chuckling.

"It's ok, Yue. Kaien, what a vivid imagination you have. I'm afraid to disappoint you but I'm none of those things."

"Oh, sorry. I know I get carried away sometimes," Kai apologized.

"Like I said, don't worry about it. I'm just a modest translator. Your father, Miessa's governor, hired me because of some international project they are starting. Lots of meetings to go to, many documents to translate," said Al, before leaning back in his chair. Now things started to make more sense.

"And about my names," continued Al. "Because of my job I am constantly moving so I have a few passports from different countries. I've changed my name a few times. In order to avoid any confusion

you can just call me Al."

"Got it, Al," agreed Kai energetically. I felt more at ease, knowing that Al was not a serial killer and I was not going crazy. It was all good.

"Hey, do you want to go with us to Granny Hogg's bakery? She has the best bagels and I'm starving," proposed Kai. Alrik looked at me as if asking if that was fine with me. I smiled in response. I really didn't mind Al coming along with us. He seemed like a nice and interesting person.

"Sure, I'll gladly join you," nodded Al.

We agreed to meet at the parking lot where Al and I had parted ways that morning. Kai and I got a chance to get home before the meeting because we literally lived one minute away by car. When I got home, I changed and stopped by the kitchen. Fransa was there with a delicious meal waiting for me. I quickly sat down and started gulping down the food. Kai was right about one thing: Fransa was a great cook indeed. I was not even halfway through my curry when I heard the familiar roar of an engine outside. Kai was already there to pick me up. I groaned and put the last bite in my mouth.

"Thanks, Fransa," I said with a mouth full of food and ran off before Kai started honking. I grabbed my favorite emerald green coat from the closet because the night air was still chilly and left the

house. As I expected, outside was Kai in his cobalt blue BMW. I hurried and got inside.

"What took you so long?" asked Kai, pretending to be irritated. "Hey, is that rice?" Kaien reached over and took a grain of rice from my hair.

"You didn't even let me finish my dinner," I complained, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"That's because you are a dawdler."

"What?!" I started, but my protests were muffled by the roar of the engine. I furrowed my eyebrows but Kai smiled at me and reached his hand out. When his index finger reached my forehead, he lifted it up, changing my facial expression from angry to innocent. I knew exactly how funny it looked because Kai used to do it all the time whenever I was frowning. We burst out laughing at the same time. I was glad I had Kai, even though he was a pain at times. For the most part, his positive attitude and energy helped me to live. It was probably selfish of me to think that way. Sometimes I had no idea why in the world he chose me as his best friend because I didn't feel like I gave much to him in return.

"Yue," Kai said carefully as he started down the road, "when will you cut your bangs? You look so much better without them." I looked in the mirror, removing the hair from my face. It was getting dark outside but I was able to see the scar that was cutting

my left eyebrow in half clearly. My big brown eyes that made me look like a child were staring back at me and my honey-colored hair was ruffled. I slowly put my hand down on my knees.

"Come on! I bet you'll be able to get Linda from our math class on a date. Man, she is *hot*," said Kai. But I didn't want to discuss the subject.

"I'll cut it right after you cut your side lock," I said jokingly.

"Trying to be witty?" he asked and with a roar, the car drove on the road.

"So, what did you think about Al?" I wondered, trying to keep the conversation going.

"I think he is pretty cool. Slightly insane but cool."

"Are you talking about the way he reacted when he saw you?"

"Yeah! That was so freaky. I felt like I was some kind of monster," said Kai, as he drove down the hill.

"Maybe you reminded him of someone he knew?" I suggested.

"Might be, but I really hope that they are not dead. I don't want to remind someone of a dead guy."

"Kai..."

"What? Would you?"

"No, but let's just forget about it. Did you let

Amaya and Rina know that Al is coming with us?"

"Nope. It's going to be a surprise," said Kaien grinning like the Cheshire cat. Soon, we arrived at the agreed spot and left the car. The night had fallen and the stars could be seen in the cloudless sky. I looked back at the long steps that I had walked that morning; the streetlight illuminated the way and it seemed like they were beckoning someone to go up and up. There were few people walking, enjoying the calmness of the night.

The sound of an approaching car brought me back from my thoughts and I turned around. A slick red Porsche pulled up and parked next to our car. I could see Kai's mouth fall open at seeing such a nice looking sports car. He almost choked when he saw Alrik getting out of it. Alrik was wearing a bronze colored dress pants with a pair of corduroy shoes and a cherry red dress shirt with a stylish beige cashmere coat that wasn't buttoned up. The outfit looked expensive but I couldn't say that he was overdressed.

"Did I go wrong with choosing my major?" mumbled Kai in awe. I was surprised as well. I knew about Al's occupation but it was none of my business. The man came to us and bowed in acknowledgement.

"Nice car, Al," praised my best friend,

unable to hold back his excitement. Al just chuckled lightly at Kai's facial expression.

"So, are we ready to go?" he asked a few moments later.

"Sure. It's not that far up the steps but it's still a little bit of walking," warned Kai.

"That's fine. I don't mind at all," Al reassured, smiling at us and we were on our way. For some reason something had changed in Alrik and he more and more reminded me of that morning. The aura of imperiousness seemed to be coming back to him. I glanced at Kai who was chatting with him. I was not sure if he could feel it too.

Soon we came to the shop and went inside. The sign in front said it was closed because it was already past seven. A bell that was over the door rang and made a familiar melody. Inside, there was an amazing smell of fresh bread mixed with other baked goods. The shop was not very spacious but it still had a nice cozy feel about it. There were half empty showcases and a few paintings on the walls; right in front of us there was a counter and cash register.

"I'm sorry but we are closed," informed a girl's voice from the kitchen that was located behind the front wall. Soon the young woman appeared but she stopped in her tracks after seeing our company.

"Hi Riny," Kai called her by the nickname he

had given her. The girl looked very embarrassed and her face turned completely red when she looked at Al. Rina was not able to say a word. Kaien came to her and ruffled her hair lightly, leaning down a little so that they were on the same eye level.

"Don't worry, Riny. It's Al. He is our friend," Kai reassured her. Rina shifted her gaze to the smiling Al who was already standing in front of her.

"Nice to meet you, Rina. My name is Al," he said, making some sort of reverence. That made poor Rina blush even more. She would not meet his eyes.

"A. . . I'm Rina," she blurted as she tried to imitate Al's bow. It came out a little clumsy but her attempts and the way she held her skirt would cause tender emotions to arise in anyone.

"That is a really cute dress you are wearing," complemented Al. She finally looked up at him and smiled.

"Thank you," she prattled, looking genuinely happy. Kai chose that moment to join the conversation.

"Riny, could we get some of your cherry pie? We could eat outside," he said, looking at the small veranda that was visible from the windows to our left.

"Sure. But isn't it a little chilly outside?"

"Naah. We'll be fine. Don't worry."

“Oh. Ok. I'll make some hot tea then,” the brunette decided before she ran back to the kitchen. We went outside and sat by a round table, which had a white tablecloth on it. The veranda was even smaller than the shop and only had tree tables. On the black iron fence, a few lanterns illuminated a small area. Around us stood many trees that would soon dress themselves in green and hide the veranda from curious eyes. Kai lit the lamp that was standing on our table and the three of us sank into a comfortable silence, enjoying the stillness of the moment and the dancing of the little fire. Kai was the first to break that silence.

“So do you want something else? They have lots of tasty stuff like rolls, cakes, pies, and bread of course.”

“I'm quite satisfied with a cherry pie for now I suppose,” Alrik answered after thinking for a bit.

“Come on. Just name something you like. I'm sure Rina has something similar,” insisted Kai.

Al chuckled lightly at Kaien's enthusiasm and gave up.

“Ok. Ok. What about lemon? Is there anything with lemon?”

“You bet! There is an amazing bun with lemon jam inside. It's not too sweet and not too sour. I think you'll like it.”

“Sure. I guess I’ll give it a try,” Al agreed, smiling.

He suddenly looked at me and asked, “Are you getting anything, Yue?”

His eyes were shining, reflecting the light of the candle, and they looked intimidating. Yes, I felt the same way as I had that morning when we had first met. There was something behind those eyes...

“I’ll have a chocolate bun with nuts,” I answered, lowering my gaze. At that moment, the door opened and Rina came out to us with a tray in her hands.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she apologized. She put steaming cups of green tea in front of us as well as plates with cherry pie.

“Thank you so much, Riny. Could you also pack two choco-nut buns and one lemon bun ‘to go’ for us, please,” requested Kaien smiling brightly.

“Sure, I’ll be right back,” replied Rina before she ran off. I put my hands around my cup to warm up a little. It wasn’t summer yet and the cool air reminded us of that fact. A small conversation was kept around the little table as we enjoyed the modest meal. From time to time I stole glances at Al, still not sure what to expect from the man. Soon Rina came with our buns and joined our table. She was wearing her coat, obviously not wanting to catch a cold.

"This is the best pie I've had in years. Did you make it yourself?" praised Alrik.

"No. I only helped my grandma. But I'm glad you like it," responded Rina, who was getting used to the presence of the stranger little by little.

"I see. Well give her my best regards," smiled Al.

"Definitely. She is probably resting upstairs now though."

"Riny, do you know if Amaya is around?" asked Kaien, as he finished his last piece of pie.

"Yeah, she is doing her homework upstairs."

"Homework?! But it's Friday! Man, she will never change," Kai exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air in theatrical fashion.

"I'll go get her," announced Kai determinedly before standing up. Rina wanted to stop him but it was too late, my restless friend was gone.

Rina's older sister, Amaya, was taller than the average girl was and she was very feminine. However, what that made her stand out the most was her pale skin and natural blonde, almost white, long, wavy hair that reached her waist. Despite her appearance, Amaya was a very serious person. She studied very hard, did many outside class activities, and always strived to be the best at everything she

did. People admired her, adored her, her academic achievements, her skills, and her beauty, but she acted very distant towards others. Kai was one of the few people who were able to get through that wall of ice that she had willingly built around herself. However, he seriously didn't know when to stop.

A few minutes later, the door slowly opened and some protests coming from the inside were clearly heard.

"Stop pushing me already," Amaya's voice said and she came out with Kai grinning behind. She straightened her coat, which she had put on hurriedly. She was annoyed, but when she saw Al, she became very quiet. Al put a napkin on the table and stood up the instant he saw the beauty. I looked at one and then the other. Even by only seeing the taller girl's face, it was obvious that something was going on between the two. I suppose that at that moment I became an involuntary witness of what people called "love at first sight", or at least that's what it looked like to me.

To tell you the truth, I had never believed in such a thing simply because I had never experienced it myself. Love, being a non-material matter, was very hard to grasp. Who knows they are in love? Only that person alone. Others can only make guesses and assumptions, just as I had done. I saw how Kai was

raising his eyebrows and was making some silly signs while pointing at Amaya. It seemed he had planned it from the very beginning. I knew he meant well, but the road that is paved with good intentions leads to...

"Pleasure to meet you, young lady. Let me introduce myself. My name is Alexander Leitner, but you can call me Al," Alrik purred in a silky voice before he kissed Amaya's hand lightly. It looked like she was stunned and didn't know how to respond. All she could do was blush. Truthfully, I had never seen Amaya at a loss for words before and I caught myself thinking that her slightly embarrassed expression and rosy cheeks somehow suited her. They breathed more life into her.

"A-ma-ya," sang Kai, "did a cat get your tongue?"

The trickster clearly enjoyed tormenting our poor friend. To our surprise, she didn't react to the teasing as she usually would. No caustic remarks followed. As we exchanged glances, I noticed that Rina, who was sitting next to me, looked surprised as well. I must also add that Kai's shocked expression was rather amusing.

"I'm Amaya Hogg," Amaya said smoothly, not able to tear her eyes away from the man in front of her. They looked at each other in silence as if not

noticing the world around them. At least, that was the look on Amaya's face. Unfortunately, I couldn't see Al's. The mood was broken by Kai, who didn't seem like he was able to sustain the silence anymore.

"Well, it's getting late, so we should probably get going," started my blue-eyed friend. Amaya seemed to come out of her trance.

"Are you leaving so soon? You are welcome to stay as long as you want," promised the silver haired girl as she looked at Kai, probably enjoying his stunned reaction. However, Kai was quick to regain himself that time.

"Thanks, Amaya, but I think Yue and I should probably get going. Are you going back, Al?"

"Not yet, I wanted to go up to the temple once again. And I would be very happy if you, Amaya, could accompany me."

"Sure. Gladly," Amaya agreed.

The following is an account that Amaya dictated to me. I apologize for any inaccuracies in describing these events as I wasn't an immediate witness.

Amaya's account

The two started climbing the old stone steps while discussing the weather, likes and dislikes, and

all other matters people spoke about when they met someone new. However, for them, the topic of conversation was not that important to begin with.

The night was getting colder and Amaya huddled into her coat. Her fingers were starting to feel numb from the piercing wind and she rubbed her hands together, trying to warm them up.

"Are you cold?" Al asked, looking concerned. His face was illuminated by the fluorescent streetlights. Even in the cold, his sparkling eyes kept their softness.

"I'm alright," Amaya answered. To be even more convincing, she let her hands fall to her sides.

Alrik smiled, appreciating Amaya's effort.

"Let me see."

The girl slowly put her cold hand in Alrik's. His hand was soft and warm, unlike hers. Alrik squeezed her delicate hand, trying to give her some of his warmth.

"Well, that won't do. Is there a shop nearby where we can buy gloves?" Alrik asked without releasing Amaya's hand.

"What? No, that's really unnecessary," Amaya tried to protest but her companion was uncompromising.

"It's no trouble. Besides, you have no pockets and holding both of your hands at the same time

while walking proves to be tricky. Not that I mind, of course," added Al, winking at her, "but let's settle for some gloves for the time being."

Amaya nodded, feeling slightly embarrassed. Even though the warmth of his hands felt extremely pleasant and she felt reluctant of letting him go, she knew he was right.

"There is a shop close by," she said after a pause.

After climbing three flights of steps, they entered a small shop that sold all kinds of goods, from kitchen utensils to shoe polish. Navigating between the narrow aisles turned out to be difficult, but finding what they were looking for didn't take too long.

"Which ones do you want?" asked Alrik, standing in front of the display with various gloves and mittens in different textures and colors.

Amaya didn't have a preference.

"The red ones, I think," she said, choosing the one that first caught her eye.

"The red ones," he echoed. For a long moment they stood, staring at the display without moving. Amaya looked up at Al, confused, but the he continued to stare at the gloves with a serious expression.

"Al?" she called, not knowing what might

have caused such odd behavior.

"Oh, sorry," he apologized, and with an uncertain hand he took a pair of green mittens.

"Those are green..." Amaya commented quietly, afraid to sound rude. However, Alrik's odd behavior confused her.

Could he be?

"Are you colorblind?"

Alrik smiled sheepishly, "Well, you can say that. I can't distinguish between colors very well. That's why I always carry my camera around so that I can look up the color later through a computer program... Anyway, can you just take the ones you want?" he gestured at the display taking a step back, allowing Amaya full access to the selections.

"Oh, sure. Sorry," she apologized and moved forward to take the pair.

As Al made the purchase, Amaya eyed him intently, trying to figure out why she had agreed so easily to accompany him. It wasn't her style at all. As a rule, Amaya was wary of people she didn't know, and she didn't fully trust even those she knew. She repeatedly scolded herself for being so careless.

At the peak of her inner battle, Alrik turned back to her and handed her the mittens. The smile that brightened his handsome face was completely disarming and something tightened inside her chest.

It had been a long time since she had felt something similar. She had forgotten what it was like.

So that's why...

They walked out of the shop with Amaya wearing her new pair of mittens, which were slowly warming up her hands.

"They look nice on you," Alrik complimented as they continued on their journey.

"Thank you. And thank you for getting them for me."

As they walked, a few foreigners passed by, talking and laughing animatedly. Otherwise, the street was completely deserted. The starry night sky, the monotonous sound of their steps, the placatory presence next to her, and Alrik's soft voice all blended together, creating a pleasant feeling of pacification.

"So, you live with your sister and grandmother? What about your parents?" Alrik asked.

"They have to travel a lot because of their job. We hardly ever see them," Amaya explained.

"Must be tough," Alrik looked sideways at her. "I grew up without my parents too. Since I was ten my aunt raised me until I was old enough to live on my own."

"What happened?"

"They passed away."

Amaya looked up at Al intently, shook her head, and fell into a reverie once again. Amaya felt like she wanted to say something but she didn't know how to start. She felt uneasy..

"It's ok. Look, we are here," Alrik announced as they took the final step up.

The man headed toward the little shrine, leaving Amaya behind. He didn't expect her to follow and she didn't want to; she decided to give him the space he needed. From afar, she watched as he stopped in front of the altar. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, offering a silent prayer. Amaya closed her eyes as well, joining without being asked. What did she pray about? I do not know. It will remain a secret between them. What I know is that she had been concentrating so hard that she didn't hear Alrik as he came up to her. Not wanting to interrupt her, he stood next to her, waiting.

"You are back? I didn't hear you," Amaya said.

"Don't worry. It's alright. Anyway, thank you for accompanying me this evening. You probably already had plans."

"No, I didn't have any plans..." Amaya trailed off. She didn't want to go home. There was nothing waiting for her except more reading and

studying. Surprisingly, homework was the last thing on her mind.

"I see," said Al in thought. "Then do you want to stay with me some more? I love how peaceful it is here."

Amaya nodded. "Ok. I have no reason to decline."

"And I have no reason to object either," said Al as they moved towards a small observatory. The town was already covered in darkness and only the yellow lights from the windows stood out against it.

"So what are your hobbies, Al? I know you work a lot. Do you have time for anything else?"

Alrik thought for a moment before answering, "Well, I like to read but it is related to my work in a way. I also have another job but that is not really a hobby."

Alrik became quiet again but Amaya was standing, leaning against the rails, waiting patiently for an answer. Then, finally, the blond man said, "Oh, I know! I like crocheting!?"

"Crocheting!?"