

STAR STABLE
MISTFALL

I N F L A M E S



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CRASH!

The miniature replica of The Statue of Liberty mom liked to keep on the little table by the door had fallen to the ground. Now it lay on its side... the tiny hand that held on to the torch about, oh three feet away from where it should be.

Mom ran in from the kitchen with an entirely predictable response.

“What was that – oh no! My little Lady Liberty. You broke her!”

“I didn’t break it!” I tried to explain. “It just fell!”

“Skye Rowan, things don’t just fall on their own, especially when YOU are standing at the scene of the crime,” mom barked. She was mad enough to use my first and last name. If she got any madder, she’d toss in the middle name too!

“Well this did!” I shot back. “Maybe a truck driving by shook the apartment building! Maybe she smelled the tuna noodle casserole you’re making in there and jumped!”

“Look, young lady. Accidents will happen, but if you just own up to it...”

I didn’t let her finish.

“You always blame me for everything!” I said, rushing out through the door of our little apartment and slamming it hard enough behind me that I heard another knick-knack fall from the table.

“SKYE!”

I could hear her yelling more on the other side of the door, but I didn’t need to hear her actually include my middle name to know she wasn’t happy with me.

Well, I'm not happy with her. We're even.

Sigh... I know she loved that statue. It was one of the first things she bought when we moved to Manhattan. I was too little then to actually remember it, but she tells me that all the time. She saw it as a symbol of our new lives – starting over in a new place, and since we couldn't actually see the landmark from our apartment in Washington Heights, she bought that mini one to come live with us.

The statue falling wasn't my fault... but of course she blamed me... It seemed like everything was my fault lately – dirty dishes in the sink? My fault. High electricity bill? My fault. And she's never said so, but I think she blames me for us having to move to Washington Heights from our old home on Jorvik. I don't even remember why we moved anyway, but I'm sure she thinks it was MY fault.

I knocked on Mrs. Jiminez's door. I could hear her cat, Tuna, meowing back at me from inside, but after several minutes – still no Mrs. Jiminez.

I headed downstairs and out onto the city streets. I decided I'd walk around the neighborhood to take a few pictures... that tended to distract me when Mom and I got into, well, whatever level of frustration with each other we were currently dealing with.

Turning the corner, I stepped into my favorite bodega to grab a soda. At the counter, Mr. de la Vega, as always, tried to upsell me.

"Just the soda? Anything else - candy? Chips are two for one! Oh, Lottery ticket? Try your luck," he grinned.

"No thanks," I said, rolling my eyes "The only kind of luck I have is bad."

"You never know," he said. "Everybody's luck changes sometimes. And what may seem like bad luck one day could be seen as good luck the next!"

"Just the soda, and you know I'm only 15 and can't buy a lottery ticket. I'll try my luck in, say, three more years."

Mr. de la Vega laughed, "Well, I'll keep the scratch cards warm for you."

After fishing out exact change from my pockets and a wave goodbye, I was back out in the sun.

I took out my camera and looked for inspiration. On the streets of New York it was never hard to find. The vibrant colors of the produce lined up in rows outside of Antillana Marketplace were like a rainbow. I got some action shots of a street dancer spinning on top of a cardboard mat on the corner. I snapped a shot of an artist spraying orange and red paint like flames onto the Audubon mural project.

I had a usual route I took to cool my head when Mom and I had a spat... and that route always took me to Innwood Park. I love this park, it's always full of energy and a rare spot in the city where you can hide in the shade of a cluster trees with a book and your thoughts. I snapped some shots of the beautifully wrinkled hands of the senior citizens playing chess. I was so focused on the details that I didn't even realize one of them was my friend.

“Skye? Is that you?”

It was our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Jiminez, seated by herself next to a chess board on a table.

“Hey,” I said walking toward her. “I came over to see you earlier, but you weren’t home.”

“Thought I’d get some fresh air and some competition in today,” she said. “Both help keep the mind young. You want to play?”

Mrs. Jiminez and I usually just did the crossword from the newspaper together while she fed me cookies. Chess? That was new to me.

“I don’t know how,” I answered.

“Oh! We have to change that right away. You can’t be a proper New Yorker until you’ve played a game of chess with an old lady in the park. Have a seat, dear.”

“Uh, sure. Okay,” I said.

She started by picking up a piece with a crown on it. “This is the king. He’s pretty important. If you lose him, the game is over, but all he can do is move one little space at a time. The most powerful piece...” she picked up a slightly smaller piece that also had a

crown. “Is the queen. She can move as far as she wants in any one direction – straight ahead or diagonally.”

“What does the horse do?” I asked.

“The what? Oh, the knight.” Mrs. Jiminez corrected.

“It looks like a horse.” I said.

She laughed. “Maybe the knight and the horse are like the king and the queen. He thinks he’s the important one while she does all the work. OK, let’s call it the horse. The horse has the strangest pattern of all the pieces. It moves in an L shape. Two steps forward, and then one to the side. Or one step forward and then two to the side. AND, this piece has the additional power that it can jump over any other piece in the game!”

“What good does that do?” I asked.

“Oh lots. Lots. Keeps the opponent on their toes. The other pieces might come barreling right at you, but the horse... the horse will keep you guessing. The horse will surprise you.”

“And that’s bad.”

“Can be, my dear. It certainly can be. But you never know. It may seem like a bizarre move at first, but it may lead you to where you need to be.” Mrs. Jiminez smiled.

She taught me what the rest of the pieces did along with a few beginner strategies and then we played a few games. I had the distinct impression she was going easy on me, but it still never took her too long to beat me anyway.

“Don’t feel bad,” Mrs. Jiminez said. “Learning to play chess takes time. Patience and time. Anything worth it takes both.”

I thanked her for teaching me the game and told her I’d be over sometime soon to visit her and Tuna and then headed out to take a few more pictures.

As I passed an alleyway, an orange flicker in my peripheral vision caught my attention. I turned and saw a homeless man warming his hands over a small fire in a metal trash can. I steadied my camera, focused the lens, adjusted

the shutter and... felt a little sad. It made sense to feel sad, of course – it was a sad sight of someone desperate and lonely in a city full of wealth and people. Here I was sulking that I had a home to go back to when I was done walking off my “mad” at my mother... but really? I was looking at someone who didn’t have a home to go back to. Oof. A little shame washed over me as I turned to head home.

I put my camera down without taking the photo. I walked the streets some more with my head low. After a while like that, I noticed one of my shoes was untied. I bent down to tie it and noticed I was next to a souvenir shop. In the window, at the height of my eyes – a miniature Statue of Liberty – dull green with a twinkling, glittery gold flame. A little bigger, a little prettier than the one that had fallen off the mantle and broken earlier that day. I stepped inside and was happy to find out I had just enough money to buy it.

I hadn’t broken mom’s statue. But I wanted her to be happy. I wanted peace.

When I walked back into the apartment, I didn't find it.

"THERE you are, young lady! I have been worried sick about you all day!" mom shouted.

"Well, I'm fine!"

"Well, I didn't know that! You didn't answer your phone at all!"

I pulled my phone out of my pocket to see how many calls I'd missed. It was off.

"Oh... well, I didn't realize it was off! And mom, come on, I'm fifteen... not NINE. I can find my way home after taking a WALK." I explained.

"Your whole generation is positively addicted to those things and I have the one teenage girl who can spend a whole day not even knowing her phone is off," mom pinched the brow of her nose. "I just... I WORRY about you. I even checked to see if you were with Mrs. Jiminez, but she's not home."

"I was with Mrs. Jiminez," I said. "At least for a little while. At Innwood Park."

"She took you all the way to Innwood with-

out asking me?” Mom was getting the pinched look on her face. I did not like where this was going.

“She didn’t take me there,” I explained. “I just happened to see her there. This isn’t her fault.”

“Oh, I know that, young lady,” mom responded. And I knew what was next. “It’s your fault.”

“Of course it is,” I sighed, not being able to hold it in anymore. “Everything’s my fault – the broken statue, your life, my life, the reason we had to move away from the countryside you LOVED. EVERYTHING is my fault.”

Mom’s face changed. She looked... sad. “No, sweetie. That’s not true. That’s not what I–”

“It is what you meant,” I said quietly as I trudged past her to my bedroom door. “You won’t come right out and say it, but it’s exactly what you meant.”

I closed the door behind me as I entered my room.

Mom quietly knocked and said she'd leave some dinner warming for me in the oven. I didn't respond.

I still had the brown paper bag with the statue in my hands... I didn't feel like giving it to her anymore. Not right now anyway. Setting it aside I fell onto my bed. I didn't even feel like taking my shoes off at this point. And I definitely didn't want to venture out for mom's peace offering of dinner. I should have taken Mr. de la Vega up on those chips, I realized as my stomach rumbled a little. Maybe a nap and then I'd sneak to the kitchen while mom was asleep.

When I finally did fall asleep, I was met by wild dreams. I walked the streets of Washington Heights until the tall buildings and sprawling alleyways turned into tall shadowy trees. And then, jutting out of the ground in the middle of this strangely familiar forest – the right arm of the Statue of Liberty. The golden flame at the end of the torch turned bright orange and then moved and flickered like the flame

in the back alley. The flames twisted and bent until they were shaped like the neck and head of a horse. The chess piece horse jumped off the torch and onto the ground and the underbrush around it caught fire. Then suddenly, the flaming chess piece split in two as an enormous charcoal colored horse with a flaming orange mane jumped through it!

The horse moved toward me, but strangely – unpredictably. It would jolt forward two steps, and then suddenly jump sideways. Jump the other way one step, then surge forward two more. I was hypnotized by its strange dance. The flames that had consumed the underbrush moved to the trees around it. The forest grew hotter and hotter. The horse grew closer and closer. Suddenly – it jumped right at me!

I screamed as I shot up – awake in my bed. But the nightmare wasn't over.

My... my whole room was on fire! The books on my desk were in flames. The laundry I'd discarded on my floor was smoldering... and the little paper bag with the new Statue of

Liberty figure inside was slowly turning into a melting pile of plastic. The little arm holding the flaming torch aloft, ironically, the only thing still holding its form.

“MOM HELP!” I screamed. “HELP!”

It was all I could think to say. But even in the midst of my panic and terror, I knew – I would be blamed for this too.

...And my life would never be the same.