



Falselight

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It began with a song, as most things do.

The instrument hummed beneath his touch as the chord rang across the courtyard. The gleeman leaned against the edge of the fountain, eyes closed, head bent towards the *lumenar*. With a frown, he turned a knob on the instrument, struck the chord anew...and nodded. Better. When he opened his eyes at last, the gleeman stared, unsurprised, at the crowd gathered around him. A multitude of faces—eager, silent, waiting. The gleeman’s eyes glittered as his long, diamond fingernails began to dance along the *lumenar*’s strings.

“Stories,” he proclaimed, “are dangerous. For they will lead you only to darkness—or so the Lumens warn. But every storyteller worth their light knows that the greatest way to speak a truth is to disguise it as a lie. And one child knew this better than the others.”

The gleeman flicked a switch on the *lumenar*, and this time when he struck the strings, beams of light projected from the instrument, twisting to form shapes in the mist-filled courtyard. The crowd watched, rapt, as the light swirled to form the shape of a child, her dress glowing and curling in the haze. The gleeman tilted his head forward.

“This child,” he continued, “had become a prisoner of the moon, trapped within the darkened lands that hide behind its opalescent form.” He stroked the *lumenar*’s strings, projecting a new light that writhed in the mist, shifting to form the image of a small girl looking up at a great white orb.

“She knew there was but one way to return home: to convince the moon to let her go. *O luminous one*, she exclaimed to the god above her. *What can I possibly offer you? For I must pass through your realm to return to my home, away from these dark valleys that know no light.*

“But as is the way of moons,” the gleeman said, eyeing the projection, “they do not readily give up what they have taken. And so the moon informed the girl that she must pass a test, a choice between three doors through which all of mankind must step: the past, present, and future.”

Opal watched, silent, with the other youths. Not *with* them, of course—the other children sat right on the glittering stones, crammed together around the fountain, watching with wide eyes and ragged clothes. No, she stood behind them on a white handkerchief, protecting her polished, reflective shoes from the courtyard’s dust. But she watched with eyes as wide as the others, hanging on the gleeman’s every word.

The crowd had grown now, passersby of every Stone gathering around the fountain to listen to the story. The gleeman ignored them all, his eyes intent upon on the projected images. His long diamond fingernails jumped along the *lumenar's* strings, and the cloud of light morphed in response, three glowing doors rising before the small girl, each a different hue.

“The door of the past,” he said, “would take the child home, to the family and fields and light that she knew. The door of the present would lead her back to where she now stood: She would emerge from the same side of the doorway she had entered, faced once more with the endless valleys of eternal darkness. But the last door, the door of the future...it would lead her to her heart’s greatest desire.

“At this the child rejoiced, for surely her greatest desire was to return home, and thus two doors would lead her true. But the moon whispered doubts in her ear, and the child began to worry—what if she chose the wrong door? *Tell me, o luminous one, what I might do to know each door, that I may see the paths that lie ahead,* she said.

“*This I can do,* the moon replied, *but a pact must first be made, an agreement between god and man. For there is one thing I desire from mortal kind, and that is but a shard of Shine.*

“The child thought about this—a Shine is not something to be given lightly—then gazed up to the white orb above. *O must illustrious, this is the only requirement you seek of me, that I honor this pact?*

“*It is.*

“*Very well,* said the child. *I swear by the Evergem to abide by this pact between god and man, which asks for a shard of Shine, and will fulfill it to the best of my ability. In return, you will tell me what lays behind each of the doors before me.*

“*I swear as well,* the moon readily agreed. Then, in his greed: *Now give it to me, child. Give me your Shine.*

“Just then, the sun—the Lord Luminant’s Evergem—passed behind the world, and the child’s light was hidden from the moon.” The *lumenar* rang with a new chord, and the air twisted once more: White light drained from the orb, replaced by a shadowy, writhing darkness. “At last, the moon was revealed for what he truly was: The Dark Thief, the Shineless god who stole each night from his greater sibling, to reflect his weakened light upon mankind.

“At this the child smiled, and said: *Our pact is done, luminous one, and now you must tell me true.*

“The moon pulsed with confusion. *What is this?* he exclaimed. *You have not given me your Shine. The pact is unfulfilled.*

“*But your radiance, it is fulfilled, the child replied. For I have sworn to abide by a pact between god and man. I am a girl, not a man, so it is impossible for me to give what you seek. As I have fulfilled the pact to the best of my ability, my end of the bargain is met.*

“The Dark Thief howled and thrashed, but there was nothing he could do: He had chosen the words of the pact, and they had betrayed him. By the laws of all that dwelled beneath the Lightness, he was forced to reveal the identity of each door.”

The dark moon evaporated, and the three doors grew larger and larger until they stood, life-sized, before the crowd. Then, the door that led back to the darkness—how Opal knew that, she couldn’t say, but she *knew*—vanished in a swirl of light, and the two remaining doors loomed over the glowing girl.

“With that, the girl turned away from the door of the present and faced the remaining two doors, those leading to either home or desire.

“But oh, what a choice,” the gleeman whispered. His long fingernails danced faster and faster across the *lumenar*. “The child stood, frozen, unsure what to do. Did she return home, to the family and fields and light that she knew, or did she take the door of desire, the pathway that led to realms unknown? For like all children, she too was filled with dreams—fantasies that whispered in her sleep of the lost crystal towers, of cities beneath the sea and the daring adventures that awaited her, somewhere, in the Faraway.

“Imagine!” The gleeman’s voice boomed throughout the courtyard. He was standing now, fingers flying along the instrument. “What would *you* choose, if given that terrible choice? Home, or comfort? Nostalgia, or desire? Responsibility, or *duty*?”

“They’re both the same!” someone called out. Opal nodded with a few others.

“Perhaps,” the gleeman whispered. “Or perhaps they are as opposite as sunrise and sunset. Behold, my friends.” His glittering fingernails flashed along the *lumenar* so quickly now that Opal could feel the vibrations in her chest. In the image before them, the girl walked up to one door and placed her hand upon the knob. The door glowed brighter, inviting her. Then, with a breath, the girl pushed open the door, and vanished into a wall of light.

Opal blinked. The images were gone, replaced by the regular crystal fountain in the courtyard. Upon its lip sat the gleeman, his *lumenar* already disappearing into its case. For the

first time, Opal truly looked at the man. His cloak was a dirty, ragged grey, his dark braids woven with small glass beads. He closed the lid with a decisive *click*, and with a small nod, he shouldered his bag and turned to leave.

“Hold on!” an elderly woman with ruby gems called out. “Which did the girl choose?”

“What was her greatest desire?” another asked.

But the gleeman ignored them all, walking through the crowd which parted for him like a river around a stone. Some applauded, but most just muttered to themselves as the courtyard began to disperse.

Opal held her breath when the man walked past her. “...sir?”

The gleeman’s braids clinked as he turned. A solemn face studied her beneath a wide-brimmed hat. Opal swallowed. The man’s eyes were diamond, the gems casting refracted rainbows. He stared at her, but said nothing.

“I...I don’t think she chose the door of desire. I think she went home.”

The gleeman tilted his head. This close, she could see the strained life of a traveler: mended clothing, boots splitting at the sole. “What’s your name, child?”

“Opal.”

“You are of the Eight Keepers?”

“Yes, sir. Sapphire.”

The gleeman looked down at the handkerchief she was standing on and frowned. “Why?”

“Why am I of the Eight Houses?”

“Why do you think she returned home?”

“I...” The gleeman raised an eyebrow. Opal spook hurriedly. “The Dark Thief...he’s a trickster, sir. If it were me, and I saw a door that led to my greatest desire...well, that’d just make me curious to know what my greatest desire *was*. So if I walked through that door, all I’d see would be a vision telling me what I wanted most, because my greatest desire would be to just *know*. But...if that were true for the girl...she wouldn’t really *go* anywhere, would she? The door would just show her greatest desire...and...and she’d still be trapped there...with the moon.” She blurted it all out, and immediately felt stupid. “That didn’t make any sense, did it?”

The gleeman knelt before her, staring at her with glittering gems. Opal gasped. The right diamond had a hairline crack in it. *It can’t be. He doesn’t look older than thirty.*

“An interesting theory, Opal of Keep Sapphire. But it begs a question: Even knowing that...would you take the door anyway?” Rather than wait for her response, the man reached up to one of his braids and removed a glass bead. He offered it to her between two fingers, his pointed diamond nails matching his eyes. “Would that my courtyards were filled with more minds like yours, child.”

Opal took the bead, holding it in her palm. Then she grinned. “Thank y—”

“Opal!”

A large woman in the habit of the Lumens rushed towards them. The gleeman winked at Opal, then rose smoothly to his feet. Opal shoved the glass bead into her pocket.

“Hello, Sister Clementia,” she said as the woman loomed over her.

“What have I told you about sneaking off in the market? Gems, if your mother found out...and *you*,” she snapped at the gleeman. “Do you have any idea who this is?”

“That, sister, is a mystery.”

Sister Clementia’s sapphire gems narrowed. “This is Opal Ravenna, daughter of the Sapphire Keeper Navius Bluestone—”

“Ah, sister, you misunderstand.” The gleeman’s eyes flicked to her, casting refracted rainbows on the sister’s habit. “Her name I possess, as she was kind enough to give it freely. But knowing a name is not knowing who one *is*, you see. That is a question most can’t answer about themselves, let alone another, and seeing as it is a question the Lumens have struggled to answer for millennia, I find it rather unfair for you to ask it of *me*.”

Sister Clementia’s gems pulsed with anger. “You dare mock my Order? Off, lightbreaker! Take your darkness elsewhere.” She shooed the gleeman, and he turned away, grinning at Opal as he passed along the glittering courtyard. Opal’s hand remained in her pocket, the glass bead clenched in her fist.

The sister’s lips thinned to a line. “What have I taught you?”

Opal lowered her eyes. “Never trust a lightbreaker.”

“And why is that?”

“Their gems refract the light...”

“...and bounce a dozen different hues back at you. A man’s light must be his own, Opal. The clear folk reflect the light around them, tempting us with twisted images of ourselves. They are of the Thief, with no inner Shine of their own.”

That didn't seem right to Opal. Her mother always said that the Evergem gave everyone a Shine when they were born. But Sister Clementia didn't seem to be in the mood to debate.

"Mod-il fahleoht," Opal replied. Gemlight shines within.

Sister Clementia pursed her lips and gave the traditional response, "Praise the Lord Omniluculent." She looked down at the handkerchief Opal was standing on. Her sapphires softened. "Well, at least you were sensible enough to protect your shoes. If your father saw their reflections marred..." She shuddered. "Come, child." She gestured to the waiting palanquin, which would carry Opal back to the Upper Luminance without having to smudge her shoes. Opal climbed in, and Sister Clementia walked alongside her, warning her the entire way about the dangers of the clear folk.

The Sapphire Keep was a triumph of architecture, its blue crystal walls designed to flow like waves from one floor to the next. The grounds surrounding the Keep glittered with sapphire shards, from the deepest navy to the lightest sky blue, making the sprawling lawns glitter like the sea.

After ensuring that Opal was well within the eyesight of the Keep attendants, Sister Clementia finally released her and returned to the Lumen temple. Each of the Eight Keepers kept a temple for their Order on the grounds, and Opal watched as Sister Clementia joined several other sisters in blue habits as they walked across the shimmering gems.

Then she slipped away to find Embyr.

The Ruby Keeper, Cimun Blazestone, was visiting Opal's father this evening, and he always brought his daughter when he did. Opal stood with Embyr on the roof the Keep, looking out over the city. The light was waning, the Evergem setting below the horizon, and the city flared up in response: Glass walkways pulsed with light, the spires and towers each glowing with the embedded luminance they had absorbed during the day.

The city would continue to glow until the last hours before dawn, when the crystalline structures had spent up the Evergem's gathered light at last. Embyr sat on the roof's edge, an anxious look on her face.

"When do you think we'll luminesce?"

Opal kept her gaze on the horizon. “Whenever the Evergem wills us to.”

“Yeah, but *when*? Amarel got his gems when he was just fourteen, but my sister didn’t get hers until she was *nineteen*. We all thought it’d never happen. Amarel joked that we’d have to cast her out with the rest of the Lightless, but I could tell papa was worried.”

“It happens to everyone eventually. *I’m* not worried.”

Embyr nodded at this, as if she’d heard something profoundly wise. Then she bit her lip. “You think I’ll get my reds?”

Opal met her friend’s eye. The question surprised her. “Of course you will. You’re the Ruby Keeper’s daughter.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t always mean you’ll get the right gems, you know? Caladine once told me about a cousin of his who luminesced when he was fifteen or so, but he didn’t get citrine like his House. The light faded, and when everyone looked at his fingernails...they were *topaz*.”

“You’re lying.”

“Dead serious. Ask papa or Amarel next time you’re over. It happened a few generations back, but it *does* happen. You can get a different Stone from your house.”

Opal bit her lip. “I...suppose. But maybe he didn’t really belong to the Keep?”

The families of the Eight Keepers always had the same gems as their Stone—family lines were carefully preserved to maintain the right genetics—but outside the Eight, people in the city had so much mixed blood that their Stones were random more often than not.

“Yeah, that’s what we thought. Still...it worries me.”

Opal thought back to something Sister Clementia always told her. “I don’t want to luminesce too fast,” she decided.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s so much pressure. You get your gems, sure. There’s a huge party, and you get declared. But after that? You have *responsibilities*. You’ve gotta uphold the Keep’s name, and marry some stuffed shirt who polishes his gems with walnut oil just because his family owns half an acre of gemtrees. Who wants that?”

Embyr grunted. “Well, fair enough.” She squinted. The Evergem was blazing as it set, and without proper gems, both of them were nearly blinded by the harsh light. “C’mon, it’ll be supper soon.”

She hopped down from the edge she'd been sitting on, and together they climbed through the trapdoor leading into the Keep. The summer nights were warm, so her mother had arranged dinner on the western grounds. They walked through the Keep hand in hand, descending floor after floor to the ground level. Opal's free hand strayed to her pocket, where the gleeman's glass bead still lay hidden. Was it really possible to luminesce into a different gem than your family's Stone? What would happen to her if she did? The gleeman's words haunted her.

Would I still take the door, to know what my greatest desire was? Even if I knew it was a trap?

She was still thinking about it when they stepped into the outer gardens. With the Evergem ceding its brightness at last, the first gemlights had begun to appear, twinkling in the darkness. She looked up to find the Dark Thief shining overhead, and she trembled at the thought of an eternity spent in its blackness. But Embyr tugged her along across a small glowing bridge, passing the flowing brook below, and entered the western grounds.

It was there that they found a boy prostrate on the crystal path, his face illuminated by the Thief's light, surrounded by a glowing pool of blood.

Opal was the first to scream.

"You are not to go near him."

Navius Bluestone was a large man, his sapphires so deep they seemed to be made of the ocean itself. His beard was a woven braid with three sapphires down the center, and a glittering circlet rested on his head. The look he gave her was stern. "He's being kept in the lower cells. I know you go down there—don't deny it—but I've got guards watching the entrance, so don't even try."

Opal's eyes were on the ground. "Yes, papa."

Her mother frowned. "If the boy is hurt, Navius..."

"He has been tended to. He's lost blood, and the Evergem knows he won't be walking anytime soon, but Healer Corulin says he'll pull through. Still, the boy is...unnatural, Tara. I won't feel comfortable until we know exactly who he is, where he came from, and..." He glanced at Opal, then frowned. "We can discuss this later. Opal, off with you."

“Is Embyr...?”

“Keeper Blazestone will remain with his daughter tonight, so I doubt you’ll see her until the morning. Cimun is rather fierce when it comes to security. I need to put on a good show for his attendants of securing his quarters.”

Opal’s mother kissed her forehead. Tara Bluestone’s eyes were lighter than her husband’s—the sky and sea, they were called. “Off with you, then. Sister Clementia will check on your room, so no dallying. Straight to bed.”

“Yes, mama.” Opal hugged her mother, gave her father a kiss on the cheek, then walked to the exit leading to her chamber.

“And Opal?” She turned to find her father staring at her, his gems glittering. “Do *not* go near that boy.”

“*Are you absolutely insane?*”

“I just want a peek.”

“If we get caught...gems, if our *fathers* find out...” Embyr shuddered. “This is a very, *very* bad idea.”

“You coming or not?”

But the Ruby Keeper’s daughter was already climbing out the window—to Opal’s surprise, she was wearing a tight dark shirt and trousers, with soft leather shoes for soundless walking. Embyr cocked an eyebrow. “I’ve been waiting for you for the past half-turn.”

Opal grinned. “Let’s go. Quiet, now.”

True to her father’s words, the entrance to the Sapphire Keep cells was being guarded. The crystal hallway was pitch black, save for the guards’ luminous gems. One turned his head towards where they were hiding, his peridot eyes casting an eerie green light down the hall. Opal ducked to avoid the guard’s gaze, waited for him to look away, then dashed across the hall with Embyr in tow.

Since neither of them had luminesced, their eyes had yet to turn to glowing gems, so they didn’t need to wear blindglass goggles to sneak through the night. But that also meant they couldn’t see anything. Still, Opal felt against the wall by the ground, her fingers searching along

the crystal...there! The wall's flawless surface was replaced by rough wood. Holding her breath, Opal pulled open the dumbwaiter—the tray was, blessedly, on another level—and grabbed the rope, lowering herself down to the lower floor. Embyr followed, though her breathing was heavy—this wasn't the sort of thing a proper heiress should be used to.

They emerged in a small guardroom off to the side of the cells, where the dumbwaiter served those taking their meals between posts. Opal cracked open the door—bless the Lumens for keeping the hinges well oiled—then peeked outside. The hallway running down the cells was empty, as were the stairs on her right that led up to the entrance the guards protected on the other side. It wasn't as dark here—lamps were always kept burning to prevent shadows to hide in, each cell lit to ensure their inmates were where they belonged.

Still, the cells weren't many: For all its grandeur, the Sapphire Keep was not a true fortress, and rare was the generation that found the cells beneath filled with more than half a dozen Lightless. They passed the four cells on this floor, then crept down the spiral staircase to the two cells that lurked beneath, splitting up to check each one. Opal's was empty, the stone bed and bucket unused, but Embyr was making frantic gestures, her eyes wide. Opal rushed to her side, peering through the bars.

And there he was.

The torch sconce was right over him, illuminating a body covered in scars. His stomach and right arm were wrapped tight with bandages, and both his legs were in splints. His breathing was ragged. Opal drew a sharp inhale as she watched his chest rise and fall. His left arm was calcified, glossy. *Like a healed burn*, she thought with a shudder. His entire body was laced with jagged, pale white lines that twisted across his chest, his neck, his face.

He couldn't have been older than eleven.

“By the Lord Luminant,” Embyr whispered.

The boy's eyes opened.

Opal bit off a scream, and even Embyr cried out in horror. *Impossible*, she thought. *Impossible*. But the boy continued to stare at them, a terrible gaze that made her tremble as she never had before.

“Mud,” he croaked.

And then they ran, ran from the boy with the terrible gaze, up the hall and into the dumbwaiter. It wasn't until they were safe in Opal's room that they held each other in terror, wondering, telling themselves it wasn't real.

"They were amethyst," Embyr whispered. "They had to be. It was dark, and we couldn't see...and they were *amethyst*."

Opal nodded, stroking her friend's hair, murmuring it was alright. Gems, she'd never even *heard* of such a thing—a luminesced *eleven-year-old*. But even that could be accepted, if his gems had truly been one of the Eight Stones.

Opal had met the boy's gaze. If his Stone had been amethyst, she would have seen the purple glow. But what she'd seen was something else entirely.

His eyes were black as night. They gave off no light, just the pale, cold glint of the torch above his head. Opal trembled, holding Embyr tight. *May the Lord Luminant save us.*

His gems were onyx.

The boy was a lighthoarder.

It was four days until she saw Embyr again.

The Eight Keepers were meeting in the city, a monthly gathering at the crest of the Iridescent spire. While the oligarchy met, their Houses gathered on the levels below, a mingling of the Eight Keeps that Opal didn't truly understand. Politics had never really interested her, but her mother insisted that she begin learning the names of all the Keep nobility—the Sub-Keepers and their cousins, the head Lumen of each Order, the eligible heirs within each Stone. Fortunately, Lady Simo'ra of the Citrine Keepers had captured her mother's attention, her orange gems glowing like an inner fire from her flawless, dark face.

At last, Opal snuck away, finding the others hiding in a corner on the thirty-eighth level. Embyr was there, as were several others, flocking around Caladine, who beamed at them all. Opal gaped—Caladine's eyes, once brown like the rest of them, now blazed with topaz gems, the golden light spilling across them all like sunflowers across a meadow.

"What was it like?"

"Did it hurt?"

“Did you see the Lord Luminant, or was it just white light, or—”

“No, no, nothing like that.” Caladine shook his head, cheeks flushed with emotion. “It was...tingling. Like bubbles rising from your toes up into the rest of your body. Then the world got brighter and brighter and *brighter* and...well, here I am.” He grinned, taking a sip from a cup of wine and flashing his glittering golden fingernails, each topaz gem filed into flawless facets. His cheeks flushed more as he wrinkled his nose. “Gems, wine is *disgusting*. No wonder they won’t let us drink it until we luminesce.” Still, he continued to grin as he raised the cup to his lips for another sip.

Opal rushed in, her momentary mission forgotten—this was what it was all about, the luminescence, the acceptance into your Keep...and oh, the *celebration*. They were already discussing when it would happen—the food, the guest list, the music. It wasn’t until an hour later, when she caught her mother walking down the steps in search of her, that Opal felt her gut twist into a knot. She grabbed Embyr, pulling her to the side.

“I’m going back. To see him, I mean. I’m going down there again.”

Embyr gave a nervous smile, her eyes darting to make sure the others were out of earshot. “You can’t be serious,” she said through her teeth, eyes pleading.

“I need to know. I need to make *sure* we saw what we think we saw.”

“We didn’t see *anything*,” Embyr hissed. They both turned at the sound of Opal’s mother calling her. “The boy’s eyes were amethyst, Opal.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“I know there’s a difference between the truth and the facts. It’s an oddity for someone so young to get their gems, but an oddity I can *handle*.”

“You’re not even curious how he ended up injured, bleeding on our own lawn? How a lighthoarder—”

Embyr clamped a hand over Opal’s mouth. “*Shut. Up.* You don’t get it, do you? The boy’s eyes were amethyst, and that is the *truth*. I can’t accept otherwise. Gems, the *world* can’t accept otherwise.” Opal’s mother called out again, angry. Embyr frowned. “You’re still going, aren’t you?”

“You’re welcome to join me.”

“You couldn’t get me to go down there again if the Lord Luminant himself offered me all eight Stones on a crystal plate.” She bit her lip. “But I won’t tell anyone. I’d say don’t do anything stupid, but...”

“What fun would that be?”

“Sure. Look, you’ve got other issues right now.” She jerked her head towards Opal’s mother, who was striding towards her with sapphires blazing. “See you around.”

She ran off to join the others still gathered around Caladine, and Opal turned to her mother, the iron fist around her stomach moving up to clench her heart.

She put on her darkest clothing and waited until the Evergem’s light vanished from the world.

Her father still had guards around the entrance to the cells, but the dumbwaiter remained open, and it wasn’t long before Opal was standing, holding her breath, before the final stairs.

I want to know. I need to know.

Step by step, she descended into the darkness, the torch fire doing little to ease the chill that had settled in her bones. Terror welled in her, an unspoken horror. This was a trap. He was a lighthoarder. He would slip through the bars, pin her to the ground, sprout his wings, devour her...

If you knew it was a trap, would you still do it? Would you take the door regardless, if it meant knowing your greatest desire?

The gleeman’s words echoed in her ears, and Opal steeled herself. *I want to know. I need to know.* She stepped into the light, and there, behind the cold steel door, was the boy.

She was almost relieved to see him sitting upright in his cell, eyes closed, back to the wall. Curiously, the bandages on his stomach and arm were gone, as were the splints on his legs. It had been days—he couldn’t have healed that quickly, right? Unless...she shook her head. She needed to know, not guess. Her eyes darted to his hands—one was hidden, but the other glinted dully in the torchlight above the cell bed. Those fingernails...no, that wasn’t amethyst. Or citrine, or ruby, or emerald or topaz or diamond or peridot. That was—

“Mud.” The boy’s voice was throaty and thick, an accent she didn’t recognize.

“I’m...sorry?”

The boy opened his eyes. The gems gave off no light of their own, just dull glints over dark obsidian. “M’name. Mud.”

Opal couldn’t breathe. Her heart was thrashing in her chest, and her legs felt like her bones had turned to water. Sweet gems, it was true. The boy was an onyx. She had heard stories of the lighthoarders—Shineless creatures of eld from before the Lord Luminant placed the Evergem in the sky, demons destined to bring darkness to the wor—

Wait.

“Your name is *mud*?” When the boy grunted assent, Opal wrinkled her nose. “What in the Eight Stones kind of a name is that?”

“It’s m’name.”

She could barely understand him through the throaty accent. He talked as if speaking through...well, a mouthful of mud.

“Whadduyou got ‘gainst mud?”

“I...” Opal faltered, lost for words. “Nothing, I suppose.”

“Mud’s good. Everything comes from mud.”

“People don’t.”

“First ones did, though. M’gran told m’. The first people rose from th’ mud, and then grew things innit.”

“The Lord Luminant created people. From the light of the Evergem.”

“Yeah, from th’ light and th’ mud. He planted people in the mud, and with th’ light, they grew.”

Opal blinked. This wasn’t quite the conversation she expected to be having. “Well, my name is Opal.”

“I know who y’are.”

“You couldn’t possibly have known my name.”

Mud wrinkled his nose. “I dinnit say that, did I? I know who *y’are*. I dinnit need to know th’ name.” He stared at her with those dark, slate eyes—baiting her, daring her.

Yes, I would open the door. “Who am I, then?”

The boy tilted his head, dirty blond hair falling over one gem. “Yer a falselight.”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Means y’ don wanna be *you*. Your friend—th’ pretty one, that fire daughter—*she’s* jus’ fine bein’ with that Shine. But *you*...you’re jus’ a dream. An’ ‘lusion, like tha’ gleeman’s *lumenar* y’ saw by the fountain. But you can’t let’m others know. So you pretend. Y’ glow, and y’ curtsy, and y’ smile. But the light in you int the light *out* of you. Falselight,” he finished.

Opal gripped the bars, clenching so hard her knuckles went white. “How do you know about the gleeman?” she demanded.

Mud frowned, then fished around in his pocket. “Damn, I loss’t.” He fell to the ground on all fours, sniffing, his nose rooting around, as if searching...then his face lit up, and he pulled something small off the ground.

Opal’s heart froze. There, between his dark, obsidian fingernails, was a clear glass bead.

“There’s memory ‘n things, see. This bead, it’s seen a time or two...but you’re th’ last thing ‘t remembers.” His eyebrows crinkled together, then he grunted. “Mm. It wants y’ back. Fair enough then, wasn’t mine to ‘gin with. ‘ere.” With that, the boy rose from the bed in a smooth motion and walked to the front of his cell.

Opal leaped back, terrified. Her breath was short, her eyes wide. But the boy simply held his hand out past the bars, the glass bead resting in his palm. “Take’t, then. It wants you back.”

She moved forward, inch by inch, until she was close enough to reach out with a trembling hand. Her every instinct told her to snatch the bead as quickly as possible, but she didn’t. She needed to *know*. So she took her time, gently gripping the bead and pausing for a moment, her eyes meeting the boy’s. Mud simply stared back, his young face solemn. Slowly, Opal lifted the bead from his palm, placed it in her pocket, and didn’t move. Mud lowered his hand, though if he wanted to, he could still reach her. They stood in silence for a moment, until the boy snorted.

“So y’ just gon stand there, or—”

“Are you a lighthoarder?” she blurted.

“A what?”

“A lighthoarder. You know...” She frowned. Gems, this was strange. “A demon of shadow. The creatures never given a Shine by the Lord Luminant, doomed to suck the light from the world like the Dark Thief.”

Mud stared at her, then snorted again. “That’s the dumbest thing’ve heard in a *while*.”

“Your eyes are onyx.”

“And yers are brown pits.”

“That’s *normal*. I’ll get my sapphires once I luminesce, and then I’ll be of the proper Eight.”

Mud threw back his head and laughed. “Eight? Yer kiddin’. There aren’t just eight Stones in th’ world!”

“There are too!”

“No,” he said, and his face grew solemn once more. “There’re *hundreds*.”

A chill crept up Opal’s spine. “Are you a lighthoarder?” she asked again.

“No.”

“What are you then?”

Mud tilted his head. Then, after a moment, he shrugged. “Imma dragon.”

This time it was Opal who laughed. But when Mud didn’t respond, the laughter died on her lips. “Please. You tell me there are more than eight Stones, then you expect me to believe you’re a *dragon*?”

“Moment ‘go, you thought I was a demon.”

“That’s different!” she exclaimed. “Your Stone gives off no light. That means you don’t have a Shine, and if you don’t have a Shine, then the Lord Luminant didn’t make you, and that means you’re Lightless, which means you’re a...” She trailed off, her jaw dropping despite herself. Mud stood leaning against the bars, his gems glinting in the darkness...but there was something more there, a swirling light. Almost in spite of herself, Opal stepped closer. Yes, there was something in the obsidian: Dark prisms in the depths, like rainbows floating on oil.

“*Mod-il fahleoh*t,” Mud said after a moment. Gemlight shines within.

Opal bit her lip. “Prove it,” she whispered. “Prove you are what you say you are.”

“I dunno how.”

“Show me your wings.”

“They took ‘em, gon’ a long time.” Mud’s hands found his pockets and his shoulders slumped. He turned to show her his back—twin spots of hard, shiny scars covered each shoulder blade. “It’s bin a whole long while, but I still missim.”

“Can you...breath fire?”

“Sure, if I want.”

She stared at him, clearly expectant, but he didn't elaborate. Finally, her eyes lowered. "I should go. It was...nice to meet you."

Mud gave her a strange look, then for the first time, grinned.

Opal shifted, uncomfortable. "Well...alright then. Er, good night." She turned to leave.

"They're gon' kill me, y'know."

She froze. "What?"

"Yer father. He's gon kill me. The morrow, after the Evergem's faded from the sky."

"Papa would never do that," she hissed. "He's the Sapphire Keeper, not some pagan brute with a club."

Rainbow swirls drifted lazily across Mud's gems. "Dunt matter. They talked 'bout me, in that meetin' with your Eight. It's 'bout power, y'see. The city finds out there're other Stones outin th' world, well, those Stones'll need Keepers. And if there're more Keepers..." He snapped his fingers, a loud *crack* against his onyx fingernails. "There goes the power." He shrugged. "S'alright. I've bin around for a long while—I might be th' last of us, and without m'wings 'm not really e'en that. I haven't been 'nything for...a good long time."

She didn't know why she did it. Her hand reached out to him, pausing just before touching, then at last, she pressed her fingers against his cheek. His skin was *hot* beneath her touch, like a flame was burning just beneath the surface, though he wasn't sweating. Mud didn't move, but he didn't step away either, so she let her fingers run along the intricate lacing of scars that covered him.

"We did this to you, didn't we?" she whispered. "Men."

Mud shrugged. "S'not so bad. I heal quick, though I don't *grow* quick. My wings'll come back in...time." He rested his forehead against the bars, his face sad. "Might be good, what with yer father killin' me. Maybe 's time to leave, y'know? Maybe...maybe I've been done, 'n I've been done *awhile*, and I haven't realized't yet." The prisms in his gems swirled in thought.

Opal took a step back. Gems, she was crying. She hurriedly wiped the tears from her face, but her eyes never left Mud, his body slumped against the bars, his gems lost in the unknown, somewhere in the Faraway.

"I have to go," she whispered. *I'll come back*, she wanted to add, but she couldn't quite bring herself to say it. "Good night, Mud." And with that, she turned and walked away, knowing that if she looked back, she wouldn't find the courage to leave. She made it to the top of the

stairway, surrounded by the empty, cold cells of the Sapphire Keep, when a voice floated up to her from below.

“G’night, Opal Bluestone.”

“Enter.”

Opal walked into her father’s study. She loved it here. Wafts of clove and coriander greeted her from incense along the walls, the fine oiled peachwood flowing in shelves carved like fins rising from the Keep’s glowing blue crystal. Every shelf was packed with books, and scrolls, and delicate golden lumenometers with silver liquid inside.

“Hello, papa.”

He father glanced up at her, and though he didn’t smile, the light in his sapphires pulsed with affection. Navius Bluestone was a stern man, but he loved his family. “What can I do for you, heartlight?”

She lowered her eyes. “Embyr was asking me about the boy...the one we found, in the gardens. You never told me what happened to him.”

“Ah,” her father grunted. “Damn shame, that kid. Turns out he’d luminesced. Can you believe that? Boy couldn’t have been older than ten.” He shook his head. “Two guards were on patrol that night when they saw him standing in the gardens. Boy was a wretch—we think he was trying to sneak some food. The guards tried to take him in for questioning, but the boy struggled like the Dark Thief at dawn. There was a scuffle, the boy grabbed a knife from one of their belts, and...” He grimaced. “He got stabbed by accident. The guards had run to find Healer Corulin to tend to the boy when you found him. We had him stable for a time, but he’d lost too much blood. He died two days back.”

Opal closed her eyes, fighting the words she heard, but the tears came anyway. *Oh, papa.*

“I’m...sorry,” she said slowly. “What...what Stone was he? Was he of our Keep?”

“No, alas. His gems were amethyst. Darkest I’ve ever seen, too. I’ve already reached out to Keeper Violens, but it seems she has no recognition of such a boy from her Keep. He must have been from the city.”

There's a difference between the truth and the facts, Embyr had told her, and as the tears fell in shaking patterns down her cheeks, Opal at last understood. The gleeman's words rose in her mind: *The greatest truths are disguised as lies*. But the opposite was true as well: Lies could be disguised as truths, and Opal realized that this world—the world of her father and the other Keepers—molded the truth as it saw fit.

It wasn't a world she wanted to be a part of.

Mud was right. I'm a falselight.

"Thank you, papa," she whispered. "*Mod-il fahleoh*."

"Praise the Lord Omniliucent. You're welcome, heartlight. I'm sorry my news wasn't better."

Yes, she thought, turning away. *Me, too.*

Opal had thought she'd known fear in the gardens, when she'd first cast eyes upon the collapsed boy in the pool of blood. She had been wrong.

So very, very wrong.

"Search everywhere!" her father roared. "Grind this Keep into shards and dust if you have to, but by the Eight Stones of the Lord Luminant, *you will find and destroy that creature.*"

Opal clamped a hand over her mouth, frozen in crippling terror as guards rushed through the cells above and below the dumbwaiter. She hid in the chute between the two floors, crouched atop the tray, her body racked with sobs, her brain not yet comprehending what she had just done.

Sitting beside her, his skin like a furnace, was Mud.

It had been almost too simple to sneak into her father's office while he was away in the temple and steal the keys he kept hidden in a secret cabinet behind the glowing bottles of liquor. Mud had said nothing when she'd arrived, and still had yet to say a word, but he'd followed her all the same. In the darkness of the dumbwaiter chute, she could see the faint glow of his gems, swirling prisms in the onyx.

Whatever he is, he's no lighthoarder. Opal had felt the truth the moment she'd placed a trembling hand upon his flushed, scarred skin. Perhaps Mud was... what he said he was. Perhaps

he was decades...even *centuries* old. It didn't matter. *He has a Shine*. That, above the scars and the accent, above the too-fast healing and those dark, fathomless gems, was truth.

Her truth.

She counted to a full two hundred after the last voice had faded down the hall. Then she pulled Mud back down into the guardroom. "Follow me," she whispered. "Don't make a single sound."

Mud simply nodded. She led him out to the main hallway of cells and up the stairs, peeking through the keyhole at the entrance. Sure enough, there was no one: The guards were frantically searching the rest of the Keep.

"C'mon," she muttered, and then they were running, her heart pounding out a symphony in her chest. Mud followed her through the servant's quarters, down the back staircase, and out onto the loading dock, where two large beasts awaited them.

Gemhorses weren't just expensive, they were a fortune. Their eyes were luminescent ivory—not of the Eight Stones, but a lower class, the Stones of beasts. They could run for days without exhaustion, and survive on barely any water. Even if you *could* get your hands on one, they were each the price of a small kingdom: Gemhorses only bred once in a lifetime, if at all, making them one of the rarest creatures on the planet.

Opal had two strapped to her carriage, blinders placed on them to shroud their true nature. She jumped into the driver's seat and pushed Mud into the carriage behind her.

With the lash of her whip, they were racing across the Sapphire grounds. Voices called out, servants crying in alarm, but it was too late. They were closing in on the front gate, a glowing masterpiece of natural crystal grown to form two crashing waves that spiraled inwards and ended in a sapphire the size of a man's fist. Opal closed her eyes, but to her shock, the gemhorses leaped *over* the gates, landing gently to the ground on the other side.

That wasn't right, was it? Gemhorses were stunning creatures, but they couldn't do *that*.

She glanced at Mud through the carriage window. "Did you...do that?"

"No," he replied. "You did."

What?

A horn sounded behind her. Opal turned, panicked, to find a legion of horses giving chase—the guards of the Sapphire Keep, their gems blazing with the lust of a hunt. Ruby, citrine, topaz, peridot...their colors blurred together as they raced in pursuit, but even with the carriage

attached, the gemhorses could not be matched. Opal and Mud flew along the crystal stones like a streak of light, shooting past the houses of noblemen, bearing like a comet down, down, upon the city.

Then her father appeared on the road before them.

From atop his regular horse, he whistled in two sharp bursts, and the gemhorses ground to a halt, obeying the sound of their master.

Opal's mind spun. *How?* But there was no time: Her father was approaching.

"Shoot at the carriage! The boy is in there," he called to the guards as they caught up. "Do *not* shoot my daughter!" He paused, his sapphires blazing with a dark light Opal had never seen before.

"Papa...?"

"Kill him."

Her mind froze as she heard the sounds of footsteps on either side of the carriage. *No*, she thought, her brain frozen with panic, desperation, denial. *No, no, no...*

"Run!" Mud barked. He was climbing through the carriage window, grabbing her wrist, pulling her onto one of the gemhorses. And then they were streaking away towards a small hut in the distance, its thatched roof covered in woven reeds and tin.

No, she thought, *not there*. But Mud leaped off the gemhorse and dragged her inside, slamming the door just as a crossbolt sank six inches through the wood.

Opal stuttered, "He wouldn't do this...he...he couldn't..."

"No time!" Mud roared. He pulled her across the room's dull, filthy carpet, out the back door...

Opal gasped. They were atop the Iridescent tower, the city sprawled out beneath them from a staggering height. In the night sky, the Dark Thief cast its silver light upon them. Far below, the city glowed and glittered, the crystal bridges and roadways sparkling with the brilliant luminescence taken from the Evergem.

"How did we get here?" she whispered to Mud. "How did you do this?"

"He didn't," a voice replied. "You did."

Opal spun around. Her mother stood before her, there on the top of the greatest spire in the greatest city, and her sky-blue gems glowed with a pure, shining love. "Come, Opal," she said with a warm smile. "The people are expecting you downstairs, and you *must* get to know

your fellow Keepers if you ever want to join them. Sometimes you're so reckless...but oh, you do look lovely, dear."

Opal looked down. She was in her favorite blue silks, the ones she had worn to Caladine's party. But had she gone to that? She couldn't remember...

"You were beautiful that night, heartlight." Her father stood beside her mother, his arm around her waist. His sapphires blazed a deep, powerful blue. "Now come—we must take you back to the cells. We must kill you, my dearest lighthoarder, and the creature you carry at your side."

"Papa..." She was dressed in rags, a pair of mismatched boots, one red, one black, upon her feet.

"Serves you right," Embyr told her, but she was grinning even as she said it. She stared at Opal with a pair of brilliant ruby gems. "I got my rubies, Opal! You were right—there was nothing to fear after all." She laughed, and extended a jeweled hand, each ruby fingernail polished and flawless. "C'mon, then. Let's sneak into the cells, pretend we're prisoners from the dreaded Dark Thief. We can close ourselves in, rip off our wings, cover ourselves in scars..."

"N-no," Opal stammered, but she was already in a prisoner's uniform, Mud wearing a matching outfit beside her. Her arms glistened with jagged scars from the whips and knives of men. Others were gathering before her—Sister Clementia, with her tight lips and frown, Caladine and Cimun Blazestone and Lady Simo'ra, with her beautiful skin and glowing orange eyes.

"Come," her father said. "It's high time you took your place as the heiress to the Sapphire Keep."

"Come," her mother said. "We're all waiting for you dear, to accept you as our own, to show you the door that leads you home."

"Come," Embyr said. "It feels so wonderful, Opal. Like bubbles rising from your feet."

As if on command, she felt it—the bubbling in her toes, rising to her feet, to her chest, blossoming until her vision blazed with the purity of white light, the brilliant presence of the Lord Omnilucent.

Come, came the voice of the sun, the Lord Luminant, the Evergem. There is no place for you in that world, illuminated one. We are your home. Let us protect you.

Then the light vanished, and she was left standing atop the Iridescent spire with everyone she knew, everyone she loved. She turned to Mud, who stood beside her, his young face solemn. “What color are they?” she whispered. “Mud... what am I?”

Mud cocked his head, then grinned. “Yer *you*, stupid. You ‘nt a falselight no more.”

Trembling, Opal raised her hands before her and gasped. All ten fingernails were a different gem—the Eight Stones covered her fingers, and on her thumbs were opposing onyx and pearl.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered.

“Two doors lie before you,” replied the gleeman, appearing beside Sister Clementia. He grinned at her, the crack in his diamond eye glinting. “A terrible choice, and what will you choose? Home, or your greatest desire? The past, or the future? Duty...or responsibility?” He grinned, braids clacking around his diamond stare. “It is a statement, Opal of Keep Sapphire, and only you must make it.” He extended a long, glittering hand. “Come.”

They all began to step forward, pressing around her, reaching for her, extending their arms in love.

“Come.” Her father.

“Come.” Her mother.

“Come.” Embyr.

“Opal,” Mud said, his voice panicked. “They’re comin’.” Opal turned to him, the boy with onyx gems. His face was worried. “Y’gotta run. Y’gotta run *now*.”

But she looked out beyond the spire to the endless plummet below, and she knew there was nowhere to run. She gazed out over the city, this beautiful, majestic world, with silver moons and glowing paths and crystalline bridges that spanned flowing rivers. It was a world of light, a city of color and beauty and truth. Her fingers brushed against something hard in her pocket: She took out the glass bead, the gleeman’s story returning to her mind.

The door of the past would take the girl home, to the family and fields and light that she knew.

But she was already home. She’d grown up here, her entire life was here: This place, this city, was the only place she’d ever known.

The door of the present would lead her to where she now stood: She would emerge from the same side of the doorway she had entered, faced once more with the endless valleys of eternal darkness.

But where she was not the place she'd thought: There was darkness, and corruption, and a falseness that tainted her childhood memories. Her glittering, innocent past had somehow darkened into a grim, experienced present.

Opal closed her eyes. "The greatest way to tell a truth," she whispered, "is to disguise it as a lie." This city was *perfect*...and a façade. It was her utopia, a distraction that let her live in paradise while ignoring reality. It was a glittering, immaculate, crystalized lie.

It was falselight.

The last door would lead the child to her heart's greatest desire.

There was only one door, one *true* door. And there was only one way to cross the future's threshold.

"Mud," she whispered. "I can't do this alone. You have to fly."

"I can't! They took 'em, they took m'wings..."

"You *must*." She turned to him. "I'll help you, okay? Just...I need you to fly, Mud."

There were tears in her eyes as she wrapped her arms around him. She looked back at her family, at her friends, at the people who stood waiting for her. *Someday I will find you*, she thought. *Somewhere in the Faraway*. Then she looked at Mud, his onyx gems wide, and pressed her forehead against his. "I need you to *fly*."

And with that, she pulled them off the spire.

They fell in each other's arms, the glow of the Iridescent spire streaking beside them. The world became a spinning mass of lights, and then Mud was growing hotter, his skin rippling, his heart beating in a frenzied, violent rhythm that Opal could feel in her Shine. He roared in triumph, and wings of white light burst from the scars upon his shoulder blades. "Come, Opal!" he cried.

She clung to him, and he held her tight, his boyish face raised in defiance as his wings spread ever wider. He roared again. "Let us go, you and I, into the light, and the dark, and the things that lie among and between!"

And then they flew, and the world seemed to *shift*: The spire, once beside them, was now below, and the ground of the glowing city rose before them like a wall that stretched upward into

the infinite. And there at the end was the door, the glowing door that she had known she'd taken all along, the one path of the three that she could say, with the authority of the blessed doomed, was *her* choice, and hers alone. Mud released a crimson great-fire that billowed before them like a herald, and together they soared towards the door, the boy and the girl, the dragon and the heiress, the darkness and the light.

And then they vanished.

He awoke to a dim morning, the sun's pale rays peeking in through the window.

Groaning, he rose to his feet, shivering in the chill. This winter was harsher than most, but he'd managed to steal so many scraps over the years that he'd kept warm enough to prevent the black frost from creeping into his toes. In the feeble light, he ignited a small can of alcohol, using the flame to warm the frozen water in the pot he placed above it. He'd managed to find four bottles of the stuff in a pharmacy just outside the city—it had been closer than he'd ever dared to go, but the reward had been well worth it.

As the ice melted to water, he looked up. Condensation dripped from the thatched roof—another rust hole in the tin. Well, he'd have to get more reeds to weave over it today, or he'd have another patch of ice in the middle of his living room. The carpet was a tattered mess, but it was thankfully too cold for the mold to set in. When at last the water in his pot grew warm, he mixed in some powders, along with some roots he'd found the previous day, poured the whole thing into a tin cup, and stepped outside.

Dawn. The sun was casting a delicate shine upon the fields beyond his hut, past his fragile crops, to the woods beyond. And beyond the woods, the city, a heap of ruins that even now, years later, continued to smoke and steam. He shook his head. The cans of alcohol had been worth it, but Paul had bathed himself in the river every day since—the cold chilling him to his core—just to make sure he was clean. The air was deadly near the city, but he was pretty sure he hadn't caught it. Still...maybe one more time in the river. Just in case.

Paul walked over to a small patch of ground, far away from the crops. The area was surrounded by a circle of stones, each one painted a different color: reds and yellows, blues and greens, oranges and purples. He'd found a preschool a few months back, and in a stray supply

cabinet, and entire box of paint-by-numbers. The numbers had only gone to eight, but he'd found a bag of black buttons and a few mother-of-pearl shells in the craft drawer, so he'd used those among the rocks as well. He crossed into the ring, where three bundles of flowers rested on the hard, frost-bitten ground. Over each flower was a cross of wood, the names engraved and painted with the same paint-by-numbers sets he'd found.

Navim Azules, father.

Tara Azules, mother.

Amber Redmond, beloved.

He stood over them for a time, sipping his broth, before speaking. "I had the dream again," he whispered. "It was beautiful, and you...you were all so real..." He closed his eyes, afraid to cry, afraid to let the tears freeze upon his cheeks. "I was real, too."

By the time he'd drained the tin cup, the sun had risen. Paul sighed, then walked through the hut, setting his tin cup by the pot, and emerged out the back door near the wooden pen. There, he was greeted by the sound of sniffing, shuffling, and finally a grunt. He opened the gate, where a large, lumbering beast stomped towards him.

"Heyo, Mud."

The creature sniffed around him, searching, until at last it found his hand. Paul grinned, letting it take the kernels of sweetcorn he'd hidden there. Mud munched happily on the snack, a deep rumbling emerging from his gut, his thick tail thrashing behind him. Paul patted Mud's scaly hide as the beast ate, then led him around the hut to the fields, where he strapped on the harness that would attach Mud to the barrow. As Paul secured the worn leather over his hide, the creature turned, sniffing blindly, nuzzling for more corn. Paul obliged. He'd been working Mud hard lately, and with the winter showing no sign of an end, there was a long way to go. When the last of the kernels had vanished into Mud's maw, Paul led him along towards the far fields.

"You were there too, you know. You even flew."

Mud snorted in response, a short crimson flame flickering from his nose, but the exhale was mostly just smoking phlegm. The dragon hadn't flown in years, and the leather harness strained against his girth. They walked along the edge of the field until, suddenly, they paused. Paul frowned, turning to find Mud staring upwards at the sun, his third lid blinking slowly as he basked in the warming light. Paul let him be for a moment, then moved to tug Mud along, but the dragon didn't budge, lowering his head to stare directly at Paul instead. The sun touched those

black, reptilian eyes, and for a moment the two remained like that, staring at one another, the light growing brighter around them. Then Paul tugged the harness again, to which Mud rumbled in protest, but lumbered along all the same. There, upon the edge of the field, they set to work, the man and the dragon, the last of each.

The only ones to have chosen the final door.

Paul worked, the glass bead swinging from his neck, but his mind was still lost in the dream. Mud, too, would often pause in pulling the barrow, his reptilian eyes slowly regarding the sun as it arced through the sky. Each time he did, the light revealed a thousand colors swirling over each black iris, rainbows floating on pools of oil.

About the Author



D.C. Harris received his M.A. in Medieval Literature from The Ohio State University, which he uses exclusively to teach his cat Latin. Based in Los Angeles, he is a professional writer and A.I. character designer as well as an award-winning beatboxer, which to his family's bemusement is an actual thing.

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