



PAPER BARRIERS

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"How did the session go, Riley?"

"I'll be in my room, mum," she replied.

"But we need to talk about—"

"I'll be in my room," Riley repeated firmly before slamming the door shut. It took an enormous amount of energy for her to move across the room and flop onto her bed. Despite having slept for ten hours the previous night, Riley was wrapped in a cocoon of lethargy. Dr. Walter said this was a part of Riley's "condition", but Riley always tried not to dwell on her therapist's monologues. All she knew that for many weeks now, exhaustion had been her constant, and only, companion. Except for Jenner, of course.

Riley carefully extracted the book from the heap of objects piled on her desk. She had read somewhere that contact with the person you love flooded your bloodstream with oxytocin, a chemical that, in the simplest of terms, made you happy. Riley knew this was why she felt a warm tingling in her fingers every time she touched her copy of *The Sword of Light*, but she had failed to explain this to her parents and Dr. Walters. They failed to see how a book could trigger such a reaction in someone's mind, and they simply refused to give importance to her claims that it was the character, and not the book itself, that she so deeply loved.

As Riley thumbed through the well-worn pages, she wondered what Jenner would say when she complained, yet again, about her parents putting her

through forced psychoanalysis.

"You can't really expect them to understand, can you?" he'd say, "They're just taking the steps that seem the most rational. Look at the bright side; a few months later you'll be off to college and you won't have to deal with this anymore." His unfailing positivity, despite all the trials he'd suffered through, was what really drew Riley to him. Positivity was definitely something Riley needed in her life.

"College...and then we'd be together? Properly together?" she'd ask.

Jenner would smile faintly, and reply with something along the lines of "As properly as is possible with this boundary of paper between us."

Riley's brain was threatening to remind her exactly how impossible her thoughts were, so she promptly immersed herself within the book. High fantasy had always been one of her favourite genres; the magic of made-up lands had been more alluring for her than the real world long before Jenner had appeared in her life. She flicked through the book and began reading the second-to-last chapter. This was the part where Jenner had to use his magical abilities to vanquish the Supreme Ruler in a final battle. Riley read about how, despite his pain, Jenner's mind was clear, and his resolve was stronger than ever. She knew everything that was going to happen in detail, but her heart still sped up with anxiety as the story went on and Jenner received massive blows from his opponent that weakened him further.

Riley wondered, not for the first time,

what this scene would be like if she were there with him. Jenner had to get up on his feet, but before charging up to the evil Leader, he would sweep Riley up in what would seem like their first and final kiss. One quick peck, filled with passion, joy, apology, and heartbreak. Then, they would be off, he with his Sword of Light aimed at the Leader's heart, and she with her daggers ready to plunge into whichever of the Leader's followers tried to get in Jenner's way. It wouldn't alter

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much of the chapter's ending, except maybe Jenner would achieve victory a bit faster, and maybe he wouldn't lose consciousness due to fatigue after fighting off everyone on his own.

It would greatly affect the epilogue, though. No matter how hard she tried, Riley couldn't envision exactly how happy the two of them would be together. So she contented herself by reading through the epilogue as it was.

"Jenner stared off towards the distance. The seawater lapped at the shore, and the waves seemed almost lazy as they moved

towards him. 'What now?' Marlon inquired. Jenner turned to face his aged mentor.

'Find a new purpose, I guess. A new life to build, and maybe a person to share it with.'

Riley softly shut the book. *That person will be me*, she thought to herself as sleep settled on her eyelids. *I'll show them I'm not crazy. I'll be with you, Jenner, one way or another.*

Even as she drifted between sleep and wakefulness, a part of her brain whispered that it was impossible. Her dreams were too far-fetched to be attainable. Little did she know that Jenner was now sitting on the warm sandy beach with a wistful smile on his face.

She'd shut the book. He wasn't entirely sure about the physics of the whole thing, but somehow, he was immediately made aware of when Riley was reading the book, and he was forced to act according to the words already inked into the pages. He'd tried so hard to communicate with her, to tell her how he felt by somehow changing the words near the end, but it hadn't worked. As always, the epilogue had ended in the same way, and Riley had fallen asleep, clutching to a hopeless dream.

Someday I'll be able to cross this barrier, Riley, and tell you exactly how I feel, Jenner thought as he gazed at the universe he was confined to. *I'll be with you, Riley, one way or another.*

Despite being a hopeless fangirl, Marisha Aziz lives under delusions of awesomeness. Contact her at marisha.aziz@gmail.com to give her another excuse to ignore her teetering pile of life problems.