

## January 12, the Year of the Fall

I continued to hold my daughter's hand after the young man's announcement. I felt paralyzed. *There's no way out*, I thought, as the man walked into the nearby office. That was the truth of it: there was no clear path out of the disaster zone, and the government seemed to be unwilling to help the leftover survivors. Not that I had been interested in going to the refugee sector anyways. The government wasn't letting any refugees into the country for fear of contamination and as a single mother, disowned by what remained of my family, there was no one to go to anyhow.

No, the refugee sector was not a place I was interested in – only for my daughter's sake would I have gone. My only question was, where would I fit in to this new community of survivors? There was not much going for me: I was older than many of the others in the atrium, and I was not very strong. My job before the monsters appeared hadn't been one that would grant any necessary skills either.

I was trained as a linguist and had received a master's in linguistics at Harvard, but I had obtained a job in military intelligence at the nearby base, cracking and formulating codes. There probably wasn't that much use in it, but I would have to try to market that as a skill. My daughter's shaking hand snapped me back to reality, and I lead her to a secluded room. On the way, I locked eyes with a young girl who was following the young leader into the glass walled office. Smart, I should have thought of that. The quickest way to security was to seduce a man in power, and the kid had already shown that he would be an apt leader. I guessed that I would have to get in line at some point too, but first I needed to come up with a plan. We reached the nearest

classroom, which was happily one not being used as a sleeping quarters, and I paused to gather my thoughts, looking at my daughter.

My daughter, Alicia, was the one thing in my life that made me happy. I didn't know, nor care, who her father was, the punishment of a former alcoholic, I suppose. When she was born, I decided to turn my life around. I got my degree, obtained a safe government position, and bought a small house in a nice neighborhood. She had saved me from a life wasted. Before my daughter arrived, I had partied most nights, living with whatever guy was willing to put me up for the month, and worked a crappy, food-service job that payed minimum wage. I had to move back in with my parents while I was pregnant, but they kicked me out a month after she was born. I only regained custody upon my receipt of my job on Ali's sixth birthday.

Ali was fifteen now, and rather pretty. She had managed to grab a few clothes into a suitcase before the hunters extracted us from our house, and she was now wearing a fluttery pink dress with yellow flowers on it. Her brown hair spilled over her shoulders in waves and down to her lower back, in contrast to my straight hair, which I always pulled into a bun. She had chosen the outfit specifically as we were supposed to depart for the refugee sector today.

"Ali, why don't we try to do something to pass the time?" I offered, "We still don't know what we are going to do, and I need time to think about it."

"No thanks." She spoke softly. Her greenish eyes were close to tears. She had never been strong, and the disaster had almost broken her. Only the hope of a somewhat normal life had kept her moving. I was anxious, as she showed no signs of wanting to do anything, but I acquiesced to her emptiness. Pushing her to struggle might only make it harder, but I had lost all of my delicacy long ago.

Sighing, I got to work on clearing my head. The only thing I had taken from my house was a small composition book that contained a rough sketch of a language I had once invented. It was akin to a doodle or a game of solitaire, just a way to pass the time between my classes and my job when I went back to get my masters, but I was secretly very proud of it. It had taken long hours to devise the system it worked off of.

Putting in new notes and expanding the vocabulary of the sketched language was like a game I was playing against myself. Could I come up with a word for every possible meaning or would I rely upon grammar to make up endless possibilities. For every word, there was a herculean effort to make them different from any one language, to devise new words entirely. I had hoped that someday, the atypical logic and words of a manufactured language would be enough to make a military code. It seemed that ambition was over.

I worked for a short time like this, and Ali finally began to exhibit interest. Peering over my shoulder, Ali began to work out what I was working on.

“Why make a new language? What’s the point?” She asked curiously.

“It exercises my brain, helps me think better. Languages have all sorts of rules and developments, but just as many exceptions. Without real use, a language will only ever be a framework, but if the framework is rich and detailed enough, the study of that language itself becomes fascinating. That’s why there are people like me who spend hours learning the grammar and words of Tolkien’s elven language.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for example, take an ordinary word, like ‘hello.’ That word is actually the result of thousands of years of refining and derivative usage of languages. English being a sort of

conglomeration of all sorts of languages. The word hello could come from the German ‘hallo’ or the Spanish ‘hola.’ It could even come from any number of dead languages, but somewhere along the way, the word ‘hello’ came to be used and it spread through various languages in various forms. Part of why language is fascinating is that it is often illogical as to how a word came to mean what it does. For example, at what juncture did the word ‘sick’ come to mean something good. If someone says, ‘That’s sick,’ it could be either good or bad, and context is necessary to determine which one. In the past, however, the word ‘sick’ simply referred to something or someone who was literally ill. Based on usage, a word can come to mean anything the community intends it to mean. Therefore, in order to properly create a language, the creator is forced to put it into time and place and imagine the various illogical usages of words and shortenings or bastardizations that give a language its flavor and determine the meaning of words.”

“So, basically it’s like you are writing a story?”

“Well that is one way of looking at it. Only, instead of having heroes and plots and intrigue, the story created is more a collection of experiences of a critical mass of language users, and putting the language together becomes an experiment. As you go, you have to say the words out loud in order to ensure that the language has the proper flow.”

“What are these notes?” Ali inquired, pointing at some pronunciation marks over the letters.

“Those tell you how to read the word so that they don’t get confused as to the meaning, like ‘read’ and ‘read.’ They are spelled the same but pronounced differently. That is so that these two words are not confused. They are spelled the same but one is pronounced lāf and the other is

pronounced lēf. They have the same spelling L-A-E-F but one is a curse, and the other one means thank you. Both are contractions as well, because the word for ‘you’ is fail (pronounced fa-eel).”

“Why is it so complicated?”

“That’s just how languages work. I put the contractions on the end of a verb to make it second person imperative, but if ‘FAIL’ was before the word, it would be second person passive, as in, you thanked instead of thank you. In that way, the language begins to take shape, it’s much more real and begins to look as though it could see actual conversational use.”

“Okay I guess, seems like complexity would prohibit its use but whatever.” With that, Ali returned to her grim contemplations. Her brief input had given me an idea, though, something that might propel me forward into this new world. I stood and moved to the door, notebook in hand. Ali rolled her eyes at me but followed not far behind.

Back in the hallway, I looked into the glass office where the girl in her sweat pants was still talking to the man who had spoken to us earlier. I moved to a table to wait for them to be finished and pulled my notebook back out. Examining it carefully, I doubled checked the logic and grammatical structure, jotting down notes whenever the language differed from English. Finally certain that the language was unique and unreadable using English grammar, I pulled a spare sheet from the back of the notebook, and turned to my daughter, “Ali, I want you to help me create an alphabet for this language. Try to make it complex, with some symbols standing for full words and some referring to individual sounds or syllables.”

“Why?”

“I think that we may have need for a new language soon. I don’t think that it will see everyday use, but we have need of coded communications in this new community.”

“But why does it need a new alphabet? Isn’t the English alphabet perfectly fine for that?”

“First of all, English uses the Latin alphabet and a Frankish invention known as Carolingian miniscule. Second of all, if you need both the message and the cypher, a code is more secure. The most secure written communication uses a cypher and an alternative grammar system. Add in an alternative dictionary, and the code can take decades to crack, especially if it is homemade and doesn’t have the traditional ‘shared’ words that other languages have.”

“Um, okay, I guess.” Ali began to work on her alphabet as I straightened my clothes. My skirt was covered in wrinkles and my blouse had stains on it. At least I looked more presentable than a lot of the other people in the room, and if I displayed intelligence, maybe that would count for something in a survival situation. Besides, while the man talked stiffly, I could tell he was just a kid, so I could probably win him over with the successful application of my figure. What I wouldn’t give for some makeup or a shower. I looked at Ali and peered over her shoulder to check on her progress. She had already done a pretty good job of making sure that every sound had its own symbol, she had even combined some of the vowels and consonants together to form syllabically based letters. I could go over it myself later if needed, all I wanted was something to put my foot in the door. Ali’s well-being came first, and I would give anything to ensure that it was secured. I took a look at the office and saw the girl leaving. Our eyes met one more time, and I felt an ominous sense of fate about her.