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## Once Upon A Re-Imagined Time: A Series of LGBTQIAP+ Fairytales

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Once Upon A Re-Imagined Time: A Series of  
LGBTQIAP+ Fairytales

**By Elizabeth Groth**  
submitted to the Honors College  
at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for graduation with

**UNIVERSITY HONORS April 26, 2021**

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## **Smoky the Dragon, and a Marvelous Discovery**

**by Dr. Stephen Strieward, Dragonologist**

Dragons, by nature, do not all breathe fire. There is no way to discern whether or not a dragon will breathe fire just by looking at their eggs (though some claim that larger eggs have a greater chance of holding a fire-breather, dragonologists have yet to find substantial confirmation of this notion). It is upon their first breath post-hatch that it can be observed.

There are a few key differences between the traditional two dragon identities. Dragons that do not breathe fire are the egg-layers, and it is most typical of them to serve as companions and swift transportation for royalty within their realms. The dragons that breathe fire are often drafted as military transportation, their flames proving useful in the destruction of enemy property. In the dragon-inhabited regions in the kingdom of Volcrayn, where my research team and myself have been stationed for the past several months, this is how it has always been: dragons that breathe fire, and dragons that do not.

Until Smoky.

Now, no one knows what name he was given among the dragons, as no non-dragon has quite deciphered their tongue, but Smoky is what my team affectionately named our delightful enigma for reasons that will soon be explained. My research team had been awaiting this hatch season with anxious hearts, for the eggs in the nest of the dragon that mothered Smoky in particular. She laid four eggs, which was unusual, as dragons in Volcrayn tend to produce a small brood. However, one of the eggs grayed and dissipated over the course of a few weeks, which was unfortunate to observe. We did not have much time to mourn that loss, because precisely two months after the lay, the first hatch began.

The first hatchling was a stunning cherry red-scaled dragon with large, round eyes that did not breathe fire. She was skittish and stayed near her parents as we continued our observations of the other eggs. Three days passed, and the next hatchling was an emerald green-scaled fire-breather, with an impressive wingspan and a keen sense of sound, which has since proven to be incredibly useful to him in battle.

At last, later that same day, the third dragon hatched. Our beloved Smoky burst from his egg with his magnificent rust orange scales and exhaled his first breath of pure white smoke. They have and will never breathe fire, nor have they ever released a breath without any smoke. This is perfectly natural and okay for someone within this particular identity of dragon. We are not quite sure whether or not Smoky will have the ability to lay eggs, it varies among smoke-breathing dragons in other kingdoms and regions, but to be quite frank, that is the least of my worries in my study of this magnificent creature.

To my surprise and utter delight, I received multiple letters from researchers across kingdoms, across the *world*, who have observed the same phenomenon. As it turns out, I was simply the first to publish any such observations. It has since been found that evidence of smoke-breathing dragons was recorded in the personal journal of the late, great dragonologist Dr. Bianca Bartell of the kingdom Lunaria, nearly three hundred years ago!

Smoky is in good company, they have smoke-breathing ancestors who served as transportation for distinguished royalty, and fought in battle as fierce warriors, blowing smoke into the eyes of enemy soldiers to obscure their vision. Our marvelous friend Smoky has a capacity for love and companionship that rivals the greatest non-fire-breathers, while also retaining their special, unique identity. And above all, Smoky is strong, stunning, and worthy of the same respect one would provide to any other dragon. I am so lucky, as both a dragonologist

and a lover of all living beings, to know Smoky, to be a part of their life, and to share their story with the rest of the world.

Dear Valued Reader,

Thank you for your interest in our beloved dragon, Smoky. They are doing well, and they seem to love all of the attention they are receiving. People are traveling across kingdoms to see them and marvel at their smoke-filled breath. They have inspired portraits, sketches, stories, poems, and even a few folk songs! Their legacy is nothing short of incredible.

The reason I write to you though, dear Reader, is because Smoky's story, though marvelous to discover, is not at all out of the ordinary. We have come to learn that there are smoke-breathing dragons across the three kingdoms throughout our collective histories.

Perhaps you have felt a bit out of place in your kingdom. Perhaps you have worn dresses on special occasions when you would have been more comfortable in a fancy suit, or perhaps you have always worn britches when you would much prefer an elegant ball gown. Maybe you do not want to be defined by what clothing you wear, maybe you do not want certain expectations for your behavior placed on you in social situations, maybe you want to enjoy certain hobbies without being told that you cannot. Anyone can swordfight, anyone can play with dolls—in fact, I myself was rather fond of cross-stitching and helping my mother bake in my youth!

Whoever you are, you were marvelously and lovingly created, just as Smoky was. If the name you were given at birth does not reflect the person you are becoming, it is completely alright to ask the people who care about you to address you in whichever way makes you most comfortable. Just know that you also must respect others in the same way that you would want to be respected. Every human, every dragon, every living soul, deserves to be treated kindly.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Stephen Strieward

## The Tale of Aleksa Arrow

Deep in the heart of Evergreen Forest sat an enormous pile of wood. Not a single piece of wood looked the same, in either shape, color, or texture. Beside the pile of wood sat a pile of metal scraps, much smaller in size but just as varied. Bits of iron, copper, tin, and more sat in this pile on the shady side of the Mother Tree.

The Mother Tree was the source of life for all inhabitants of the forest. Her roots stretched to the Sirens' Sound, a narrow but mystical body of water where the sirens lived, connecting the sea to the Great Lake, near the kingdom of Felicitis. The sound kept her roots watered, and her power kept the sound filled and ensured that the water would stay flowing and clean. Pixie Berries grew in her leaves, and Wood Sprite Blossoms grew from her branches, keeping the tiny forest citizens nourished. As for the centaurs, it is said that when a centaur kneels before the Mother Tree in need of some resource or wisdom, she provides.

On the sunny side of the Mother Tree, beyond Evergreen Forest, lay the kingdoms of Felicitis, Volcrayn, and Lunaria. Each kingdom was home to royalty and nobility, and all three prospered from the work of their common citizens, nearly all of whom were farmers, artisans, fishermen, or some combination of the three. The sunny side of Evergreen Forest was the dwelling-place of the wood sprites and centaurs, and on the shady side of the forest lived the sirens and pixies. The shady side stretched further than any creature dared travel, and grew darker as the trees grew larger, some even surpassed the size of the Mother Tree and were far more intimidating. No kingdoms lay beyond the shady side. Rather, it became a refuge for people of ill-repute— that is, all kinds of thieves, practitioners of dark magic, traders of dangerous items, and the like. Walking from the fresh fruit markets and light magic demonstrations of the sunny side of the Mother Tree to the mystical unease and deceit of the shady side felt like eating

dessert before dinner: nothing stops anyone from doing it, and it is likely nothing bad will happen right away, but if it becomes a habit, bad things are likely to occur.

Now, it was on the shady side that the massive pile of wood and the smaller pile of metal sat, piles that hid the outline of a door carved into the Mother Tree, through which the one and only Aleksa Arrow slipped in and out.

Aleksa was the most notorious thief in the forest and the three kingdoms. It was rumored that she could swipe a man's horse right out from under him, and that she had *actually* done it—more than once! No one, not the palace guards, common people, nor the forest-dwellers, knew that she lived in the hollow of the Mother Tree, hidden in plain sight.

She was the one responsible for the wood and scraps of metal. In addition to being a skilled archer, Aleksa was also a very handy tinker. Within the hollow, she built a number of gadgets to make life a tad easier. She constructed a pulley system to gather seeds, leaves, and Pixie Berries, a tap to collect Healing Sap as the Mother Tree provided it, which she sold to wizards in the forest for more than it was worth and left in jars outside the homes of families in need for free, and a tap and spigot to collect water from the roots. Not only did these inventions make Aleksa's life easier, they also made the hollow an accessible environment for her young sister, Anya.

Anya was born without the ability to use her legs. She knew, however, that she was lucky to be alive. Her mother was not so lucky, she never got to meet Anya. After her mother passed away, Aleksa did her best to help her father care for Anya, but he fell sick and passed away as well. The officials wanted to send the girls to live with their uncle who did not have the patience to properly care for Anya, so Aleksa decided it was time to leave Felicitis for good.

Aleksa was strong, nearly an adult, and muscular in her arms from constantly toting her bow and quiver of arrows around. She carried Anya away from the kingdom and fled to the forest. For several days, they made camp in areas near the sunny side of the Mother Tree. Aleksa was careful to conceal their identities, lest word of their location travel back to the kingdom. But the risk proved to be too great. Two young women traveling alone, one of them without use of her legs and needing to be carried, were bound to be remembered. Once Aleksa realized that the shady side of the tree was also the safer side for them, she knew she needed to find a home somewhere in it. The problem lay in the true lack of safety of the shady side as a whole, a place of many darknesses. When one is caught between a rock and a hard place, one must then seek shelter in the hidden hollow of a life-giving tree.

And so it was in the Mother Tree that Aleksa and Anya Arrow built their home. That space between shade and sun, dark and light, true evil and true good, that is where Aleksa lived her life. Her nimble fingers and gentle walk, skills she acquired in her years of hunting with a bow and arrow, lent themselves nicely to theft.

That is to say, Aleksa herself was the one who constructed the massive piles of wood pieces and metal scraps because they were the pieces of wood and metal that were not useful to her in the things that she built. In the dark of night, her path lit only by a full moon, Aleksa crept through the forest and into one of the three kingdoms, always a different kingdom each moon cycle, and gathered as many scraps from the wastepiles of nobility and royalty that she could carry. In placing her findings on the shady side of the Mother Tree, the piles went generally unnoticed by the people who lived there.

As the piles grew, however, those people began to realize that perhaps whoever was making the pile would not notice a bit of missing wood to keep that night's fire burning a tad

longer, or a bit of tin to make minor repairs around their homes. After nearly a year of illegal rubbish collecting, Aleksa even managed to set out a small wooden crate of unburnt coal for the citizens of the shady side of the forest to cook their dinners over or warm their homes with.

Now, one may be wondering, after hearing this much of her tale, what motive Aleksa Arrow had for providing convenient resources for free to the forest citizens in a central location that happened to be right next to her secret hiding place. Surely, one might ask, she was not risking discovery and arrest just to make scrap piles for people she hardly knew?

While it is true that simple kindness was not Aleksa's primary reason for making the piles, she knew it pleased the Mother Tree to show acts of selflessness. This symbiotic relationship, where Aleksa gave to others as she took from the Mother Tree, is what allowed both parties to flourish and thrive from this living arrangement. Though, in the grand scheme of things, Aleksa's true reason for the piles was indeed a very selfless act for her fellow tree-dweller.

Since Anya could not walk, but was continuing to grow from a child into a young lady, Aleksa knew that if the time came for them to leave the tree, she may not be able to carry Anya for as long as she once could. So she put her handy craftswomanship to the test and attempted to build a mobile chair for Anya to sit in. As she envisioned it, this chair would have larger wheels in the back and smaller wheels in the front, not unlike some of the chariots she had seen carry the Felicitian royals in parades through her town.

Unfortunately, this design had its flaws. The wood often became brittle and snapped when weight and pressure were applied, even with some of the Mother Tree's

magic Healing Sap rubbed into the crevices between the bits of wood, and the metal had a habit of softening and losing its mold on the hottest Evergreen Days. Sometimes on cool nights under half or crescent moons, Aleksa and Anya would test this wheeled-chair out by rolling it over to the Siren's Sound. Aleksa helped Anya to the ground and the girls splashed their hands around in the water, gathering small shells and kelp that Aleksa would hang and dry into a sort of jerky for a snack.

But on those full moon nights, Aleksa made her rounds to the kingdoms to acquire any bits and bobbles she possibly could use to try and create a functional wheeled-chair from the trash of the rich who would never notice it was gone... or so she thought.

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On one such night, Aleksa crept her way to the kingdom of Lunaria. Lunaria was famous for their devotions to the moon, so it was no simple task for Aleksa to sneak around the kingdom unseen, for many Lunarians took part in outdoor rituals or simply looked up at the moon as they set their intentions on the night of the full moon. However, it was worth it, as Aleksa gathered her most valuable scraps from this particular kingdom: metals. In a bin outside of a blacksmith's workshop, Aleksa found ores of copper, tin, iron, and on rare occasions, more precious metals, like silver and gold, in addition to chunks of coal. This particular blacksmith happened to be the personal blacksmith of Lord and Lady Nocturn.

The Nocturns were nobles of the highest rank in Lunaria, keepers of the Moon Scrolls and the noble art of Star-Charting. Their daughter, Selene, cared not for gentle devotion to the moon, Star-Charting, or Tide-Measuring—these activities bored her immensely. Instead, she grew to become an incredibly advanced swordswoman. As a child, she studied simple fencing techniques, but she grew to be so fond of the sport that she began to train under a personal

instructor her parents hired, and the blacksmith forged custom swords for her as her need and skills progressed.

Unlike the carpenters in the other spots she stole from, the Nocturn's blacksmith noticed Aleksa's deeds and recognized the pattern, that every third full moon his barrel of scraps ran low. In the casual banter he maintained with Selene as he sharpened her sword, he voiced his concerns. The young woman decided to take it upon herself to defend this most valued citizen of her kingdom, and on the night of the full moon, she crept from her bedchamber, sword in hand, and waited in a bush near the blacksmith's wastebarel to catch the perpetrator.

Selene was startled to see a young woman her own age filling a satchel of her kingdom's precious resources, but nonetheless she knew it was her sworn duty to defend Lunaria against injustice. She shook the branches of the bush as she approached the thief from behind.

Aleksa's blood ran cold. She dropped the satchel, put her empty hands up, and turned around to find the tip of a sword pointed at her. Her gaze drifted along the expertly crafted sword to the icy gray eyes of the woman wielding it, eyes bright enough to rival the stars against the night sky.

"Look, I'm not looking for trouble, I can put the junk back if you want it that badly," Aleksa said, taking a gentle but deliberate step back from the tip of the sword. Thoughts raced through her mind, *Should I just run? There's no clear path. Okay, I've been caught. We're in trouble if she's royal security. Anya is going to worry if I'm not back by daybreak. Who is she?*

Those striking gray eyes glanced down at Aleksa's satchel, then back at her empty hands. She lowered her sword as Aleksa swiftly drew up her bow and arrow, prompting her to raise her sword once more. She spoke at last, saying "Not looking for trouble, you say? And who do you think you are to imply that royal property is 'junk'?"

Aleksa and the mystery Lunarian stayed locked in a staring match, weapons drawn, as she retorted "It's a barrel full of scraps. I hardly doubt Lady Nocturn is going to concern herself with a few missing ores."

"No, but her daughter might," the Lunarian girl scoffed, and pointed her sword at the ground to reveal the crest of Lunaria emblazoned on the hilt, with the glint of a moonstone embedded above it.

Aleksa shouldered her bow and returned her arrow to its quiver. She went down on one knee as a sign of respect, and fumbled out the words "I had no idea. I'm sorry, miss. Or, I suppose your highness, or your ladyship?" Her safety in the forest was over. There was no way she would be returning to her place of refuge. Or so she thought.

To her surprise, the daughter of Lunarian nobility was not one for formalities, as she replied "Selene. I'm just Selene. But that doesn't answer the question of who *you* are," she inquired as she returned her sword to its sheath and offered her hand to help Aleksa to her feet.

Aleksa rose and replied, "As I recall, you never asked me who I am, only who I *think* I am, which is a question with many answers that I don't know if you're prepared to hear." She was attempting to steer the conversation away from her identity.

"What do you mean?" Selene asked, still alert, still on her guard.

"Well, I think a lot of things factor into who I see myself as. I think of myself as an orphan, reaching adulthood doesn't make my parents any less dead. I think of myself as the sole

provider for myself and my younger sister. Well, save for our benefactor, but she doesn't exactly speak to us. In fact, she doesn't speak at all." By including cryptic details in addition to the truths of her life, Aleksa could tell she was stumping and confusing the nobles' daughter whose brow grew more furrowed by the second. She continued, "I think I'm a swift and silent archer who's never missed a shot. I think I'm a good role model for my sister, but I... I don't know if I'm a good person. I think I use my hunting skills to gather scraps from her highness's royal wastebarel because my sister can't walk, and I'm trying to make her life a little easier. And, above all, I think I'm someone who only provides the most necessary information at any given time, and I've already given you *far* more than that, so if you don't mind, I need to get home before the sun rises."

Aleksa picked up her satchel and began dump the contents back into the barrel, but Selene gently touched her shoulder and said "Wait. Take some. It's alright."

Aleksa stopped and thought about how lucky she was that her back was turned lest Selene see how her cheeks reddened at her touch, but she attempted to compose herself and turned around. "Are you sure?"

Selene sighed, and explained her sudden change of heart. "What you don't seem to understand is reason why we in this kingdom, no matter our status, concern ourselves with scraps to begin with. My people, many generations ago, started out as several tribes of hunter-gatherers on this land before unifying to form the kingdom of Lunaria under our devotion to the Luna, the great Moon Goddess. We used what the land provided us to its fullest extent. Now, we've been blessed with an abundance of resources, but we, as a people, haven't lost that instinct to use what the land so generously provides us until it can no longer serve us. And it sounds to me like you are using these resources to do

something very important for that sister whom you love so dearly. So you can take some scraps, and I'll tell Leopold, that's our blacksmith, that I didn't see who took them."

"Oh Selene, thank you so much. How can I repay you?" Aleksa asked. This question was a risk, as she was unsure of how long she could maintain the charade of her identity if she were to continue speaking to Selene, but she knew it was respectful to ask and hope Selene would want nothing in return.

Selene tilted her head thoughtfully before speaking. "I have two conditions. The first is that you let me help you with whatever this is that you're doing to help make your sister's life easier. Please," desperation entered her voice as she continued on, "I have access to resources that you don't. And I want to help you. I know you are not of his kingdom, but it is written in the Moon Scrolls that Luna decrees we must offer support to those in need. I looked into your eyes. You hold a lot of pain in your soul. I'll do what I can to help ease it."

Aleksa knew Selene had pure intentions, for she had also looked into her eyes, the proverbial windows to the soul. She made the decision to place a slight amount of trust in the open-hearted Lunarian.

"I'll meet you here again tomorrow. Same time, just after nightfall. Don't make me regret trusting you," Aleksa said as she shouldered her pack again. "What's your second condition?"

"Tell me your name," Selene ordered the honest thief.

Aleksa was not startled, and she had braced herself for the question. While she was not notorious in Lunaria and Volcrayn as she was in Felicitis and Evergreen Forest, with wanted posters on every tree and public notice boards, she still needed an alias. She used the same one she used on the rare occasion that traders needed a name for a particularly rare or valuable trade. "Ember. Ember Sagittari."

Selene did not look convinced, but she nodded in satisfaction. “Ember. Well, I’ll see you tomorrow night, Ember.”

Aleksa nodded, gave a quick curtsy with a flourish of her cape, and raced back to the tree before Anya woke up. She fed the young girl her breakfast, then promptly fell asleep bathed in the glow of warm patches of sun that shined through knotholes in the Mother Tree. She found herself dreaming about the Lunarian girl’s dark braids glistening in the moonlight, her gentle hand pressed against her shoulder, and her eyes twinkling among the stars.

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Aleksa woke at sunset and prepared dinner for herself and Anya, meager handfuls of nuts and berries, but Aleksa also prepared a very flavorful tea from herbs she traded for and the petals of forest flowers that filled them right up. When the sun fully set, she kissed Anya on the forehead and said “I’ll be back by morning.”

Anya cocked her head to the side, her messy red curls bouncing against her shoulders. “Last night was the full moon. Where are you going?”

“Fishing, foraging, you know. We need more food. Don’t worry, Curlytop. You know I’ll be careful.”

Anya smiled. She trusted her big sister to take care of herself. “See you in the morning bright!”

“Be quiet, be good!” Aleksa pulled the hood of her cape over her head, concealing her own shock of red hair as she set out into the night.

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When Aleksa arrived outside the blacksmith's hut, Selene was already there. Selene accidentally broke into a massive smile at the sight of the hooded woman, appearing to be relieved that she had shown up. She realized that she was smiling and staring, and quickly assumed her royal composure, adjusting her shawl around her shoulders.

"Welcome back, Ember." Selene noted that Aleksa was a smidge taller than her, not by much, but she did have to look up to make eye contact.

Aleksa curtsied with her cape again, and Selene giggled. "You don't have to do that. We don't do that here. But I appreciate the gesture, you are very kind."

Aleksa blushed, feeling a tad embarrassed by her formality. "My apologies, Selene. I'll remember that in the future. I grew up in Felicitis, the utmost respect for royalty and nobility is required there."

"Worry not. I think it's sweet," Selene said as her slate gray eyes lingered on Aleksa's hazel ones. "So, Ember, shall we begin by you telling me precisely what we're doing?"

"Yes! So, as I said, my sister, Anya, can't walk. I have been trying to build her a chair with wheels, but the materials I've been using to build the wheels are not as permanent as I would like."

"Oh Em, I have *exactly* what you need! Follow me!" Selene led Aleksa to a fenced in clearing full of all kinds of pieces and parts, gears and mechanisms, furniture, and finely crafted wooden wheels of all shapes and sizes. In addition to the various parts, there were also several crates full of used tools to work with. Aleksa was awestruck.

"Selene.... This is *incredible*! And these things, it's okay to take them?"

Selene giggled at how surprised her new friend seemed to be, as this was a staple of her society in Lunaria. "Of course! That's what it's for! We do not let a single thing go to waste

here. If someone acquires new tools or supplies or furniture, their old things are donated here. We call it the Field of Un-Waste.”

Aleksa unlatched the low wooden gate in the fence and walked around the field. When she found precisely the wheels she thought might work, along with a few other gears and tools she thought might come in handy, she prepared to head back to the Mother Tree, saying “Thank you so much, Selene. I know your terms were for me to allow you to help, and to give you my name, but I still feel as though I am indebted to you, and I will find a way to repay your kindness someday. I hope you have a good night, I’ll be on my way now.”

“Wait! Em, I was wondering if perhaps you would be interested in staying a while longer? We could sit down by the shore and talk, maybe figure out other things I could do to help Anya?”

Aleksa was startled but pleased that Selene remembered her sister’s name and was growing fond of the nickname Selene had given to her secret identity.

Hey kiddo,

We just wanted you to know that if your heart is open to love, there is someone out there who is going to see you for who you truly are. No matter what mistakes you have made, no matter how many bad things have happened in your life, there is always hope. The person who is going to love you, every part of you, can be anyone.

When you open your heart to love, the possibilities are endless. You are going to have a grand adventure with the person of your dreams. If there are people who tell you there is something wrong with *you* for loving whoever your heart chooses, those people should not be in your life. They are wrong. You are not broken, you are not a mistake, and you deserve every happy thing that comes your way.

After Lord and Lady Nocturn finally gave their blessing, we were married in front of the Mother Tree. The ceremony was beautiful, we wore fine dresses and exchanged stunning Moonstone rings, and Anya was our maid of honor in her special chair. We are living out our happily ever after.

It wasn't easy to reach this point, between hiding from authority, hiding from parents, and hiding from the idea of happiness. Once we both accepted that we were meant to be, we stood up for ourselves on behalf of our love. You can do the same. Don't forget to support those around you who are also finding their happily ever afters!

Love always,

Lady Aleksa and Lady Selene Arrow-Nocturn

### **Non-Parents Anonymous**

Astrid did not see who gave her the envelope, only that it was tossed through her open window in the night, had only her first name scrawled across the front in messy letters, as though whoever addressed it was in a great hurry, and was sealed with purple wax stamped into a symbol that was all too familiar to her: an ornate letter “Z”, the witch Zoralia’s emblem. Would it ever end?

There was something different about this envelope compared to the contract Astrid signed with Zoralia, for the handwriting looked nothing like the witch’s distinct, thick lettering. Astrid cautiously opened the envelope and pulled out a letter that looked more like a notice that would be hung in a shop to inform townspeople of upcoming events.

In that same hurried, shaky handwriting, the letter read: “You are cordially invited to attend the first gathering of Future Parents Anonymous. You are not alone. Meet at noon, under the oak tree near the fishmonger’s cart, market • , Felicitis. Fear not, things are not what they seem. See you then, H.M.”.

Astrid was startled. Who was this mysterious H.M.? How did they have access to Zoralia’s stationary? What was meant by the cryptic “things are not what they seem”? Astrid was quite sure she knew what the subject of the meeting was, as her dealings with Zoralia were an important part of her life.

She decided to get some sleep, and would ask her brother Quincy, a royal nighttime guard of the kingdom of Felicitis, to follow her at a distance, armed and ready to protect her from any tricks Zoralia might be playing on her.

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Meanwhile, at the home of James and Samuel Pan-Capra, satyrs who also had a history with Zoralia, the same letter was received. James found the letter first thing in the morning and shook his husband awake in a panic.

“Look! It’s from her!” he exclaimed as Samuel rubbed his eyes, sat up, and pushed his long bangs to the side to get a clear view of the letter.

James put on his reading glasses and read it aloud. “H.M.? Does that stand for Hench Man? One of her gremlin cronies out to rope us into another one of her deals?”

“Don’t be silly, my love, gremlins can’t write,” Samuel replied. He wrapped his arm around his panicked husband and kissed the curve of his left horn. “Take a deep breath. Whatever this is, we’ll face it together. Just as we always have, and always will.”

James leaned into Samuel’s comforting embrace, and Samuel planted another kiss on the top of his head before continuing, “We’ll have to leave very soon if we’re to get to the market square by noon.” He gave James a tight squeeze, and the satyrs rose from bed to ready themselves for whatever lay ahead.

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When Gwyndolyn Greenvale opened her teeny-tiny copy of the letter, written in a slightly more careful hand than the others, the fairy did not tell her partner, Winter Winkle. She knew her power rivaled Zoralia’s in terms of strength, though she was 1/48<sup>th</sup> her size, and her light magic could protect her at this meeting, should something go awry. Gwyn was used to taking care of herself. The sight of the words “Future Parents” startled her, as Gwyn was informed by a medic fairy long ago that she was incapable of laying fairy eggs. That morning, she tied her deep purple hair back into a strict bun with a few loose curls, tightened the strings of

her corset below her wings, kissed Winter goodbye, and told them she would be back late this evening before flitting off to the market square in Felicitis. Luckily, her wings did not get tired, as Felicitis was the nearest kingdom to the fairies' village on the light side of Evergreen Forest.

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The final letter went to the home of Queen Giselle and King Franklin Petris of South Volcrayn. When Giselle saw the witch's emblem, tears welled up in her eyes. Any time she was reminded of the deal she made with Zoralia, she was also reminded of why she would never make good on her end of the bargain. The queen and king were not future parents, they were former parents. Giselle and Franklin were very young, newlyweds, when Giselle gave birth to their son, Marcus. They kept the young prince hidden from the kingdom, with the intent to present him in the royal courts on his eighteenth birthday, as it was common knowledge across the realms that babies with royal blood and potential for magic were at high risk of being kidnapped by greedy traders, witches, and gremlins.

But Prince Marcus grew into a strong young man, and at age fifteen, he enlisted in the Second Great War against his parents' wishes. He was tragically killed in his very first battle. Ever since then, his parents dared not speak his name, lest word spread throughout the kingdom that an heir was born and lost. From that knowledge, more questions might arise about when the queen was going to have another child, and the couple could not bear the heartbreak of losing another child.

However, Queen Giselle and King Franklin knew they must be brave and face whatever the witch had in store for them. They donned their travel capes and took their carriage to Felicitis in silence, bracing themselves emotionally for what was to come without knowing for sure what that could possibly be.

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Everyone casually sauntered up to the oak tree when the sun reached its noon point. Gwyn fluttered into a branch, James clutched Samuel's strong hand with his sweaty, shaky one while Samuel traced a figure eight in the dirt with his hoof, Queen Giselle and King Franklin were partially surrounded by Volcrayn guards, the red feathers in their helmets contrasting the green feather of Astrid's brother Quincy's helmet, who stood at a distance pretending to be interested in some fish while Astrid sat next to the tree, dirtying her dress in a most unladylike manner. A very young man, very thin, perhaps underfed, no older than fifteen years, approached the group. He held up an envelope with Zoralia's wax seal on it and everyone nodded. He spoke "I'd like to thank all of you for coming today." Every royal guard's hand hovered near their sword, ready to draw in an instant. "She's not coming. She knows nothing of this gathering, do not speak her name." There was panic in his voice, and his eyes darted around everywhere, as though he, too, was on guard, fearing Zoralia might stumble upon this secret, mysterious meeting.

"I gathered you here to *beg* you not to go through with it. Please. All of you have the chance to know your future children, to *love* your future children. She keeps this... this list, right next to her spellbook. I was mopping up her lair, and I read it. Her list of every deal she's ever made. Even the deal my mother made in exchange for me is on there, with a little 'x' by it to show the deal was fulfilled. None of you have an 'x' by your name yet. She has an enchanted quill she uses to change the color of her Everlasting Ink, she uses certain colors for certain deals. Red for items, purple for magic, green for children. Firstborn children. All of your names are in green."

Astrid was the first to speak, and she scoffed, "How organized. She must be a Virgo."

Gwyn rolled her eyes, though she could hardly be seen, her sheer green wings glinting along with the tree's leaves in the sunlight. No one else bothered themselves with knowledge of the stars, so no one responded to Astrid's remark.

The young man, the mysterious H.M., continued, "Maybe. I don't know. I don't care. I just couldn't bear to live without trying to do something to prevent this from happening to another child."

To whoever finds this happy note:

Welcome to the family. We heard that you might be having a hard time fitting in with the people around you, or maybe it was one of your friends who feels a little different from everyone else. Maybe you are a girl and you find yourself wanting to hold hands with another girl, or maybe you are a boy who wants to talk about boys instead of girls, or maybe you don't quite think in your heart that the words "girl" or "boy" describe you.

We hear you. We understand you. We have things in common with you. You are not alone, and you are so loved by all of us here at Non-Parents Anonymous. Even though none of us are going to be parents in the traditional sense, we are here to support you as parents in this letter. Any time you may feel like you don't quite belong, please open up this note and say to yourself: "I am enough. I am loved." Feel free to pass those words onto any friend who needs to hear them, too!

You are enough! You are loved!

Love is always love,

The Non-Parents Anonymous Family

### Author's Note

These stories were no easy feat, but they are my proudest accomplishment to date. I have been writing LGBTQIAP+ fiction for over a year now, in sci-fi and fantasy/historical fiction settings, but nothing piqued my own intrigue as much as this idea I had to simply write, as I called them, “gay fairytales”. In addition, those stories were also often geared toward new adult readers. I located a chasm in the literary archive for LGBTQIAP+ fiction that was accessible and appropriate for middle grade readers, roughly ages eight to twelve, and decided to shovel in a little bit of my own work to begin to fill that chasm.

In approaching the tale of Smoky the non-binary dragon, I needed to make sure that I was not writing something that turned a gender nonconforming character into the subject of a scientific study in the same way that LGBTQIAP+ people were scientifically “studied” and experimented on in harmful ways throughout history. Since dragons logistically cannot write or speak on their own in the world I created, I simply wanted the story of a dragon that did not quite “fit the mold”, so to speak, to be observed and told through the eyes of an expert on the subject, so that it would be *as though* Smoky themselves was telling their own story. Using the allegory of fire-breathing dragons, non-fire-breathing dragons, and smoke-breathing dragons is accessible to the minds of middle grade readers.

Aleksa Arrow's story was conceived under the idea of “bisexual Robin Hood”. While this story in particular does not showcase Aleksa existing in a heterosexual-passing relationship, her character is meant to be a bisexual woman. If her story were to be expanded, she would not suffer from this instance of bi-invisibility. I would like to expand all three of these stories in the future, but it is with great disappointment and embarrassment that this one is currently left unfinished. As it stands, Selene stops Aleksa

from leaving and they talk until nearly sunrise. Nights turn to weeks, and as two seasons pass, the bond of friendship between Aleksa Arrow and Selene Nocturn blossom into unconditional true love. Selene meets Anya, and “Ember Sagittari”’s true identity as Aleksa Arrow is revealed via a wanted poster on the sunny side of Evergreen Forest. Nonetheless, Selene still loves Aleksa, and introduces her to her parents, Lord and Lady Nocturn. Selene is forbidden from seeing a wanted thief romantically, and Aleksa packs up the tree and Anya and flees into the shady side of the forest. A centaur tells Selene where they are after kneeling before the Mother Tree to be granted the knowledge, and Selene tracks the pair down. With a passionate kiss, Selene vows that she can convince her parents to welcome her into their family. She re-meets the family with the lovable Anya, and they collectively explain the full situation. And, as any good fairytale should go, they all live Happily Ever After, The End. It is revealed in the accompanying letter that Aleksa and Selene marry and hyphenate their last names, and do not fall victim to any derogatory LGBTQIAP+ fiction tropes or stereotypes. Through including a character with a visible physical disability and a character coded to be Indigenous (Selene, and, really, all citizens of Lunaria), this story strives for the kind of intersectional representation of diversity that middle grade fiction severely lacks.

It is with even greater disappointment and embarrassment that the final story, *Non-Parents Anonymous*, is currently left incomplete as well. The intention for the rest of the story is that H.M. can never see his mother and is absolutely miserable being witch’s errand boy. He discovers none of the people at the meeting he called can or will make good on the contracts they signed, to give their first-born child to the witch, Zoralia, and they band together as a found family group and set out to go against the witch to rescue and reunite this child with his real mother, and also realize they don’t need whatever they got from the witch in the first place.

Astrid's contract was for her to always be lucky, and realizes she's happy being alone, and her character is meant to represent an asexual identity. Gwyn traded her potential first born for a spell for bringing back the dead and uses it to bring back H.M.'s mom once they reunite them and break the contract. James and Samuel traded theirs so that satyrs can have a valid marriage, as all non-humans fight for marriage rights, meant to represent racial issues, and the found family starts a satyr's rights movement. H.M.'s mom needed a life-saving potion. Giselle's contract was for a long lineage with her second child, which doesn't matter because grew too old and didn't have a second child and turns the kingdom of Volcrayn into a democratic monarchy instead. This story was an ambitious project, and I did not employ enough self-discipline to have it completed by the deadline.

Finally, after each story, there is a letter from one or many of the characters from the preceding story to the reader of the book, who is intended to be an eight-to-twelve-year old, but as an asexual-bisexual gender-nonconforming author who grew up with no LGBTQIAP+ representation in my childhood media, they are also somewhat letters to my younger self. They are things I think a child who is growing up queer or has a friend who is growing up queer needs to hear in order to live comfortable, happy lives within their senses of identity, attraction, and community. That is what I want anyone who reads these stories, no matter what their age, to find within their pages, and I am proud to have created this world where these identities exist realistically and magically.