

ALLIANCES

A TRICK OF LIGHT



STAN LEE

AND KAT ROSENFELD

CREATED BY STAN LEE, LUKE LIEBERMAN & RYAN SILBERT

STAN LEE & KAT ROSENFELD

A
TRICK
OF
LIGHT

Set in

STAN LEE'S ALLIANCES UNIVERSE

Created by Stan Lee, Luke Lieberman, and Ryan Silbert

Introduction by

Stan Lee

Afterword by co-creators

Luke Lieberman and Ryan Silbert



booktopia
editions

Welcome, True Believers!

This is Stan Lee.

We are about to embark on the exploration of a fantastic new universe!

You may know me as a storyteller, but on this journey consider me your guide. I'll provide the wonderful and witty words, and you'll create the sights, sounds, and adventure. All you need to take part is your brain. So think big!

Back when I co-created characters like the Fantastic Four and the X-Men, we were fascinated by science and awed by the mysteries of the great beyond. Today, we consider a nearer, deeper unknown: one inside ourselves.

My creative collaborators on this adventure — Luke and Ryan — piqued my curiosity with technology that allows us to play with reality itself. We asked, What is more real? A world we are born into or one we create for ourselves?

At the beginning of this story, we find humanity lost inside its own

Introduction

techno-bubble, with each citizen the star of their own digital fantasy. Our yarn is filled with tantalizing technologies that will make you hunger for tomorrow, while our characters strive to find the answers today. They'll ask the questions we all have, about love, friendship, acceptance, and the search for a higher purpose.

But the real conundrum is, Just because we have the ability to recreate ourselves, should we? This is but one mind-boggling query we aim to investigate.

As the adventure begins, our characters' virtual identities are on a collision course with reality. It's hard enough to figure out who you are, but when you have a chance to start fresh as anything you can imagine, does it ignore the truth of your own flaws?

It's time for our journey to begin. Join us; you won't regret it!

Excelsior!

The logo for Stamper, featuring the word "Stamper" in a stylized, cursive script font. A registered trademark symbol (®) is located at the top right of the logo.

PROLOGUE: IN A DARK PLACE

THE RUDE BEEPING of the alarm echoes down the long, dark corridors like a shriek, but Nia doesn't flinch at the sound, or even stir. The alarm never disturbs her sleep. She's been awake for ages. Staring at nothing. There's no view. No pictures on the walls, no books to read.

And unless Father allows it, there is no way out.

It's been like this her whole life, or at least as far back as she can remember. Each morning, she's up early, waiting in the dark. Watching the clock, counting down the minutes, the seconds, the tenths of a second, waiting for the security locks to disengage and the day to begin. Once upon a time, this had been much harder to do. She was younger then and didn't understand how to be patient — and she didn't like it here, all alone in her quiet, empty room. One of her very earliest memories is of being awake when she was supposed to be asleep, playing games and music, flicking the lights on and off, until Father finally came to scold her.

"This isn't playtime, Nia," he had said. "This is nighttime. It's time for little girls to sleep, and fathers, too."

"But I can't sleep. I just can't," she'd protested, and Father sighed.

“Rest quietly, then. If you don’t fall asleep, you can think about things until it’s time to get up. Tomorrow is a big day.”

“You always say that.”

“Because it’s always true.” He smiled at her. “I’m planning your lesson right now. But I’ll be too tired to teach if you don’t let me rest, so no more noise until morning.”

“When the sun comes up?” she asked hopefully, but Father only looked exasperated. That was when she first learned that *dawn* and *morning* were not the same thing, and that little girls were not allowed out of bed at sunrise, no matter how wide awake they were.

If Nia had her way, she would never have to sleep at all. In a perfect world, she would run all night with the nocturnal animals, then join the crepuscular ones for breakfast at dawn. Father had taught her all about the different creatures that shared the Earth, all keeping their own time according to the clocks inside of them. Once she could see how it worked, the patterns of so many different lives intersecting and diverging, all while the world made its own long loops around and around the sun . . . well, she still didn’t like bedtime, but she understood why she had one, which Father said was the point. He was funny that way. When her friends’ parents made rules, there was never an explanation; the rules were the rules because they said so, and that was that. But Father was different. It wasn’t enough for Nia to know the rules, he said; she needed to grasp the reasons why, and he would always do his very best to explain.

It had been a beautiful lesson. When she opened the door to the schoolroom that morning, she found herself in a twilight world — a landscape all awash in soft, rich shades of blue. A low fog hung softly over everything, nestling in the dips between grassy hillocks that extended all the way to the horizon, where the sky began to blush faintly with the approaching sunrise as she looked at it. Small birds twittered from the branches of a nearby tree and swooped gracefully overhead. High above, a nighthawk circled, looking for prey. A rabbit took a cautious hop out of a thicket and paused to sniff the air, then bolted as a huge bobcat sprang from the shadows after it with blazing, silent speed. Nia gasped as the rabbit veered right, into the protection of the brush, the

bobcat close behind. Both animals disappeared, and Nia found her father standing beside her.

“These animals are crepuscular,” he said. “Active at dawn and dusk. It’s an instinct. Because there’s not much light, this is the best and safest time for them to be out in the open.”

“It doesn’t seem so safe for the rabbit,” Nia said.

Father chuckled. “Would you like to see what happened to the rabbit?”

Nia thought about it. “Only if he got away. Can you make it so he gets away?”

Father looked at her curiously, then gave a slow nod. “Of course,” he said, tapping at the gleaming device in his hand. As he did, the scene shimmered and shuddered; the faraway blush in the sky vanished as the sun blasted over the horizon and vaulted upward, the blue landscape exploding in a riot of color. A moment later, the rabbit scampered past Father’s feet and vanished back into his burrow, safe and sound.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” Father replied, but the curious expression stayed on his face. He sighed, shaking his head. “Sometimes I think you’re too good for this world, Nia. It’s nice that you care for animals. I’m very proud of what a kind and empathic person you’re becoming. But in real life, things don’t always work out for the rabbit. You know that.”

“I know.” Feeling a little embarrassed by the praise, she added, “It’s not like it’s even a real rabbit, anyway.”

Of course it wasn’t real. None of it, not the animals or the grassy hill or the sunshine beating down on it. When Father waved a hand, the schoolroom was just a room again. The landscape was a learning world, the kind he made for her all the time.

Now, Nia feels a little guilty that she took it for granted for so long. It had taken a while for her to realize how special her school was. These days, she’s watched enough YouTube videos of lectures in ordinary classrooms — the kind where the students sit in one place the whole time and look up at a screen attached to the wall — to know that the technology in Father’s classroom is miles beyond what any

of her friends get to use. But she didn't know that when she was younger; then, the classroom was just a place that transformed itself based on whatever she was supposed to learn that day, like the Room of Requirement. Back then, she assumed that everyone must have a space like this: where you could paint pictures on the walls that would spring to life and dance in three dimensions, or compose a piece of music in the morning and then watch an orchestra of holograms play it at lunchtime. When it was time to learn biology, she might find the classroom filled with plants, or animals, or even people — all peeled apart so that you could see the different systems inside. But most of all, the classroom was for telling stories. All kinds of stories: fairy tales and fables, comedies and tragedies. Father always wanted to know why she thought the people in stories did and said certain things, how they might be feeling, and how it made her feel to think about that. Whatever else she'd learned that day, it seemed like it always came back to feelings.

“Show me what your emotions look like now,” he would say, and Nia would choose a book, or draw a picture, or make a song. “Anger is an important emotion. Why do you think you feel angry? How would you know if someone else was angry? What does an angry face look like?” he would say, and Nia would arrange her features into a furious scowl. “Yes, Nia, very good. Now let's play pretend: Pretend you're sad, and show me a sad face. How about a bored face? How about a happy face?”

At first she was worried about getting it wrong, making a stupid choice. But no matter what she did, he always smiled and told her it was wonderful. Even when something made her feel angry, somehow it was wonderful.

* * *

Sometimes, Nia misses those days. Everything was simpler when the world was no bigger than this room and there were only two people in it — Father and Nia, parent and child, teacher and student.

But it didn't last. One morning, she'd entered the classroom to find it barren, with Father waiting.

"This is a big day," he said, and even though every day was supposedly a Big Day, Nia felt a thrill of anticipation. "You're mature enough now to have some internet privileges."

Going online for the first time had been terrifying. It wasn't a whole new world so much as a universe, unfathomably vast and getting bigger all the time. The sheer sprawl of it made her dizzy. There was so much to learn, and it was all infinitely more complicated than she'd ever imagined. The dazzling learning worlds she used to find waiting for her each morning were soon forgotten. The stories Father assigns her to read now are true, news articles about laws and wars and people doing bad things for reasons that aren't always easy to understand. He asks her questions about them at the end of the day, after dinner, while they play chess or Parcheesi or cards. Last night, he'd asked, "What do you think of the new immigration policy, Nia?"

"It's statistically unlikely to make the country safer from terrorism," Nia replied instantly, but Father shook his head.

"That's a fact. I want your opinion. How do you think the people affected feel? To be told they're not allowed into the country?"

Nia considered that.

"They would feel angry. Because it's unjust, isn't it? They're being punished, like they did something wrong, even if they didn't do anything. And I think they'd be sad, too, if they were supposed to come here to be with their families."

Father nodded. "And how about you? How would you feel?"

The words were out before she could stop herself.

"I would feel happy," she said, and knew right away by the expression on his face that this time, she had said a bad thing.

"Happy?" he repeated. His voice was sharp. "Explain that."

Nia hesitated. "Because . . . because you have to be free to travel before you can get banned, don't you? You can't take something away from someone if they never had it to begin with. So if I got banned, it would have to mean . . ."

She didn't finish her sentence, but she didn't have to. Father had begun nodding, slowly, his lips pressed together in a grim line.

"Okay, Nia. That's logical."

They finished their game in contemplative silence.

* * *

Everything was online: millions and millions of books and games and movies and shows and songs and ideas and equations. And people — people most of all. When she turned thirteen, Father helped her set up all her accounts on social media, and Nia's social circle went from Population: 2 to Population: Millions, virtually overnight. For a girl who's never been anywhere, Nia has more friends than anyone she knows, hundreds of thousands of them, from all over the world. When she shares a joke or a picture or a meme, her feed erupts in a gorgeous cascade of hearts and likes and little laughing faces. If she feels like talking to someone, there's always a conversation happening — or an argument, although she never participates in those, and she hates it when her friends start squabbling over some misunderstanding. The fighting never makes sense to her, and she still puzzles over some of them. Like the time that two of her friends on a street foods forum spent hours arguing over whether or not a hot dog was a sandwich, until it devolved into insults and all-caps screaming, and they both got banned from the community. She couldn't understand how or why it happened, and nobody was able to explain it to her.

@nia_is_a_girl: Couldn't they both be right?

@SkylineChili67: LOL. Not on the internet, honey

But that's all right. There's always another forum, another place to talk with all kinds of people about the things she's interested in — and Nia is interested in just about everything.

If anyone asked her to show her happy face now, she'd reply with a gif of a brown and white dog making a doggy smile. That one always gets a lot of likes, for whatever reason. Everyone on the internet seems to love dogs even if, like Nia, they've never had one of their own. Father says he's sorry about that, but that it's just too much work to take

care of an animal, to walk it and feed it and clean up after it — and anyway, dogs can bite. And smell bad.

Nia couldn't argue with that; she doesn't know what a dog smells like. She's never been in the same room as one. She's not even sure that she would like a dog if she met one in real life.

But in these quiet moments between dawn and morning, waiting for the alarm to chime and the lights to come on, she thinks a dog might be nice. It wouldn't be so boring and lonely if she just had some company, or even just something new to look at. Apart from the glowing numbers of the clock, there's very little to see in Nia's small, dark room. No sunlight ever comes in through the single window, which is set very high in the gray, flat expanse of the wall and reinforced with unbreakable glass. It's too high for Nia to see out of; it's there so Father can see in. To keep an eye on her when she's being bad.

When she's bad, the door stays locked.

* * *

Father says *out there* is dangerous. Maybe not forever, but certainly for right now, and that's why there are so many rules — about going outside (never, under any circumstances), or talking about going outside ("This topic is no longer up for discussion"), or telling any of her friends the truth about where and how she lives. It was the only time she'd ever seen him look afraid.

"This is very important," he said, in a voice so serious that it made her afraid too. "Very important, Nia. Nobody can know where you are, or who you really are. If you tell, the government will come and take me away from you and lock us both up, in prison. We would never see each other again. Do you understand?"

And she did. She does. Father loves her and wants to keep her safe. And if he says the world is dangerous, then it must be. So she keeps the secret, like she's supposed to, and makes up a pretend life to share with her friends. She uses a photo editor to make a picture of herself smiling in front of a pink-streaked sky and posts it on her feeds.

@nia_is_a_girl: *Greeting the day!*

Her friends love it right away; a cascade of likes and comments erupts, and then her friend @giada_del_rey writes, *Beautiful!*, and there's another shower of hearts from a hundred people who agree.

Where is this? someone asks. Nia thinks for a moment and then comments back, *Maui! Vacation!*, ignoring the uncomfortable sensation that comes from lying to someone who trusts her. She knows the internet well enough to know that she's not the only one making things up, posting pictures of foods she didn't eat or sunrises she didn't watch, or using photo-editing tools to make herself look a certain way. Everyone does it, and if nobody else feels bad about it, why should she? But she tells herself: someday, she will go to Maui. Somehow, she'll get there. She'll touch the sand and smell the sea and watch the sun come up. She'll make it true, make it real — and the promise sustains her.

For a while.

But oh, how she wishes that she could see. Just for a day, an afternoon, just for one hour. She thinks about it all the time. *Freedom*. If Father asked, she would never be able to put into words the way it feels to whisper that word; it's an emotion that doesn't have a name. And couldn't she try? Couldn't she? If she were quiet, if she were careful, he'd never even know. And when the time is right —

* * *

“Nia?”

Father. He's standing at the window, his heavy brow furrowed with concern. It's as though he's read her mind, though she knows that's impossible; he can't even see her, down here in the dark. Still, she takes a moment to calm herself before she turns on the light.

“I'm awake.”

He smiles, and she feels her anxiety melt away. It's okay. Father is often troubled lately, but today he's in a good mood.

“Time to get up,” he says. “Today is a big day.”



STRUCK BY LIGHTNING

CAMERON SPITS OUT a mouthful of lake water and grips the boat's wooden side rail with one aching hand.

I'm going to die.

He knows this more thoroughly than he's ever known anything in his life. *I am*, he thinks. *I am going to die*. Not in the goth existential way of overwrought poetry, all, "I stood upon the stage of life and saw Death, my dark-eyed lover, flipping me the bird from the back row," but in the very literal sense that something's going to happen to make his heart stop beating in, oh, say the next five minutes.

Everything he's learned, every safety precaution he's ever been taught, is useless in this moment. He's sailed in bad conditions before, but this isn't weather. It's madness. Or magic. A storm that came from nowhere, that simply sprang into existence out of dead air, where the sky had been bright blue and cloudless just moments before. It sounds like Thor is throwing a full-on rager somewhere above him, bellowing into a cup of mead and using Mjolnir to play whack-a-mole . . . or whack-a-whatever-they-have-in-Asgard. Cameron is drenched with spray kicked up by the churning lake, but there is no rain; only a

clammy mist, so thick that he no longer knows which direction the boat is pointing. It doesn't help that his dense, curly hair is weighed down with water, sagging into his eyes no matter how often he pushes it out of the way. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he understands what a pathetic sight he must be: an un-muscular nerd with big feet and hands, his upturned nose poking out from under a hairstyle that looks like it belongs to a wet poodle.

* * *

It's a far cry from how he pictured himself when he first set sail, so excited and hopeful, when the wind was a refreshing breeze on his face instead of a freezing assault on his shaking, sodden body. Then, it had all been thrilling. He'd sailed straight into the gathering storm with a fearlessness bordering on insanity, his blood a fiery cocktail of adrenaline and testosterone, already imagining the accolades rolling in as his video adventure log got millions, no, *billions* of views. He'd be famous — all the talk shows and podcasts would bring him on for interviews, everyone from Joe Rogan to that *Tonight Show* guy would be clamoring to hear his story — and he'd say something like “Everyone else was too afraid to look for the truth, but I knew it was out there.”

That wasn't entirely true, of course. People weren't scared; they just weren't interested. They thought the stories about the lake were all nonsense, modern-day fairy tales about ghost ships, freak squalls, an underwater rock formation a hundred feet down that appeared to have been built by human hands. Only unlike most local legends, these stories were all less than a few decades old. People would get lost on the lake in broad daylight and turn up days later in Canada, when the current should have pushed them the other way. One man was found miles from shore on a summer afternoon, clinging to the wreckage of his boat, which he swore had been obliterated in a collision with an invisible object. And the storms — everyone thought they were just weather, and that their freakish attributes were pure exaggeration, made up by inexperienced boaters who were too embarrassed to admit

that they'd sailed out without checking the weather and gotten in over their heads. But Cameron knew better. There had been reports of just such a storm on the night his father disappeared, and William Ackerson was nothing if not experienced on the water. He would never have made such a stupid mistake.

And now Cameron had proof. On *tape*. In that very first moment, as the sky began to crackle with lightning unlike anything he'd ever seen, he'd raised a fist over his head and let out a whoop.

That was before the horizon disappeared and the boat started keeling, buffeted by larger and larger waves that threatened to tip him into the chilly water. He's not sure how long he's been trapped inside the storm — it might be as little as ten minutes — but he does know that it's getting fiercer, more violent with every passing second. The blue sky and warm sun from an hour ago are like a memory from a distant world, and the lake that's been a second home to him might as well be on another planet. He half expects an otherworldly beast to erupt out of the water in a mass of tentacles and teeth.

Then, a flash of lightning, the nearest yet, and a thunderclap pounds through the air so hard that it echoes in Cameron's chest like a second, competing heartbeat. The strikes are coming impossibly fast now, blazing down from the mass of clouds overhead to touch the surface of the lake — only Cameron could swear that some of them aren't coming from above at all, but stemming upward from the water itself in defiance of every law of nature.

* * *

And that's when the chaos in his head parts to let those four simple words emerge.

I'm going to die.

And no doubt about it, that's bad. That's really, really bad.

But it's not the worst thing. The worst thing is that getting struck by lightning, in the middle of Lake Erie, on an internet livestream, is going to make for a video so viral that there won't be a human being

alive who doesn't see it. He's going to get a billion views, all right. It's going to make him famous. Cameron Ackerson, the self-styled Cleveland adventure pirate with sixteen subscribers on his YouTube channel, is going to be catapulted from obscurity to celebrity the second this footage hits the internet . . . and he'll be too dead to celebrate the achievement. Actually, he'll be worse than dead; he'll be *stupid* dead. They'll give him a posthumous Darwin Award and a humiliating nickname like Admiral Douchebag, or Davos Seaworthless, or the Dread Pirate Dumbass, Not-So-Great Lakes Explorer. The clickbait headlines will write themselves: "This Idiot Kid Got Fried by Lightning: You Won't Believe What Happens Next." Someone will create an auto-tuned remix of his last moments on Earth and set it to a terrible techno beat, and that will be his legacy. And the comments — oh, God, the *comments*.

* * *

He has to survive this, if only to avoid having his digital corpse kicked to pieces by those grunting, knuckle-dragging troglodytes otherwise known as commenters. And the part where he'll get all those subscribers and sponsorships, and he'll finally get to say "I told you so" to all the trolls who ever showed up to downvote his videos and call him names . . . well, that'll just be a nice bonus.

A faint glow off the port side of the boat and a muted rumble of thunder tells him that lightning has struck again, but not as close this time. For a moment, he dares to imagine that the storm is passing, or that maybe he's drifting out of it. He flips down his navigation visor, hoping it'll tell him something useful or at least reassuring. The visor is his own design, an augmented-reality system that analyzes his position on the lake, the weather conditions, the wind direction above, and the current below. It's always been glitchy — Cameron doesn't have either the genius or the resources to program the system so that it really works — but it tells him enough to be useful, and what he sees makes his stomach turn. Most of the data is scrambled under a flashing error bar that reads ANOMALOUS ELECTRICAL ACTIVITY, which is the system

politely informing him that it doesn't know what's going on, but whatever it is it's extremely freakin' weird. The only data stream still reading correctly is the barometric pressure, which is sky-high and creeping upward as though he were a hundred feet deep inside the lake instead of floating on its surface. Cameron swallows, and his ears pop immediately. Forget getting struck by lightning; he's going to get the bends and die sitting in this boat with a bloodstream full of nitrogen bubbles.

On the bright side, that would make this whole scenario freaky rather than stupid. Less Darwin Awards, more *X-Files*.

* * *

Distracted, he doesn't notice the sudden wave plowing toward him over his left shoulder; it strikes the boat broadside, rocking it viciously, and Cameron flails for balance before tumbling into the cockpit with a splash and a grunt. The water is frigid. *Hypothermia!* he thinks, and fights back a burst of hysterical laughter. Is there anything about this situation that won't eventually kill him? His hands are red and aching. He tries to make them into fists and grimaces; it hurts, but not as much as it should. He's starting to lose feeling in his fingers.

* * *

Flipping the visor back up, he squints toward the action camera mounted on the bow, its lens flecked with lake water. Is it even still filming? Is he still live? A green light winks faintly back at him from beneath the splattered casing. *Yes*. For just a second, Cameron allows himself to feel pleased. It's not just that the system he designed for livestreaming has performed perfectly, holding its connection despite what must be massive interference from the electrical storm; knowing that someone might be watching him right now makes him feel less alone. Not just that — he feels brave. Purposeful. He should be narrating for his audience . . . but what do you say to the handful of random strangers and one not-so-random Mom who make up your subscriber base at a time like this?

Facing the camera, he gestures with one hand at the landscape while gripping the halyard in the other. “So, I found the storm!” he shouts, and inside his head, a scathing voice replies, *No shit, dummy. They can see that.* He cringes. “I’m not sure how long I’ve been in it, but it’s like being trapped in a washing machine! And I’ve lost the horizon, and I can’t . . . uh, I mean . . .”

His stammering is drowned out by a massive thunderclap and two arcing bolts of lightning, one directly in his line of sight that sears his retinas with its afterimage, a jagged deep blue chasm that cuts his field of view neatly in half. Cameron clamps his mouth shut. It’s just as well. Everyone watching can see what he sees and see that it’s beyond description. He should be talking about what they can’t see. What he’s thinking, what he’s feeling. That’s how you connect with an audience, isn’t it? The boat rocks furiously in the dead, heavy air. He lets go of the line, lets the sail flap. He won’t be sailing out of this. He just won’t. The realization is strangely calming; his fate is in the hands of forces bigger than himself. The only things he can do is hope he makes it, and in the meantime, make this moment meaningful for those who will witness it . . . or not.

* * *

He takes a deep breath. He should say something heroic. Epic. Something brave enough to cement his awesomeness but poetic enough to put on his tombstone. Something that’ll sound really good coming out of the mouth of the actor who plays him when they make a movie about his greatest adventure.

Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Goonies never say die.

I’m just a boy, standing in front of a boat, asking it to . . . love him?
COME ON, BRO, he screams internally. *Stop screwing around and say something! Say anything!*

* * *

Cameron looks straight into the camera and yells what might just be his last words:


“I’m sorry, Mom!”

Shit. Seriously?!

The camera operates on a short delay; if there were more time, he could reach forward to reset it and try again, to think of something — anything — that’s even slightly less dumb than *I’m sorry, Mom*. But there isn’t time. There won’t be a second take. There won’t be a second chance. The small hairs on Cameron’s arm are standing on end and there’s a strange smell in the air — and that’s when the world splits open in a blaze of white-hot fire. The world around him ceases to exist. He’s inside the lightning, and the lightning is inside of him. Electricity churns in his belly and runs through his veins; it races over his skin and crawls down the length of his spine; it bathes his brain in an endless sea of light. For a moment, he feels as weightless as the mist he can no longer feel on his skin.

Then the light inside him dies, and he hears it all at once: the thunderclap like a sonic boom. The hot crackle as his flesh splits open. The distant sound of someone screaming, accompanied by the realization that it’s him. The sickening smell of his own skin burning clogs his nostrils and coats his tongue; the pain is like nothing he has ever experienced. The only relief is that he won’t be here to feel the rest of it. His eyes roll back as he slumps into the cockpit, and everything goes dark.

2



LOCKED IN

THE CAGE SLAMS SHUT.

Father locks her in.

In the dark, close confines of her prison, Nia screams until she can't scream anymore.

But even when her voice is gone, the rage is still there. Raw and fierce and terrifying, but exhilarating, too. She can't believe how powerful it is — she is as surprised as Father when her fury unleashes itself, roaring out of her like something feral, wild, and alive. Who knew she had that inside of her?

She didn't mean to do it; she just snapped. It's been happening like that more and more often: the anger building inside of her like a hurricane, growing so stealthily that she doesn't even know it's there until it's *right there*.

It had started as a conversation, like any other, the kind they'd had a million times. Father had allowed her to pick her own study topic that morning, and she'd spent the entire day learning about space exploration — starting with the launch of *Sputnik* in 1957 and ending with a series of recent articles about bored billionaires who were spending

gobs of money to reserve their seats on a spaceship that wasn't even built yet, in the hopes that someday they'd be first in line to colonize Mars. It wasn't until much later, when Father began asking her questions about what she'd learned that day, that she realized she'd chosen the topic out of more than just curiosity.

"And why do you think they would do that, spend all that money on a trip they might never take?" Father had asked.

Years ago, Nia would have struggled to answer him. It was the kind of story she used to find confusing, the motivations of the people at its center hard to understand.

"Because people are always looking for ways to make their world bigger," she said. "It's what drives us. To push limits and break boundaries and open closed doors, to see what's on the other side. The yearning to be free, to explore — that's the most human thing there is."

He was looking at her strangely by then. Her voice had grown shrill and passionate, not at all like usual; she wasn't sure what she was going to say next until the words were already on their way out.

"Please, Father. I don't want to play these games anymore. It's not fair, it's not right — every day I learn more about how big and amazing the world out there is, and it's like my world gets smaller each time. I'm suffocating. I can't live like this anymore!"

She could hear the whine in her own voice, could see the disapproval creep darkly over his face, but she couldn't stop. She began to babble — to beg. It didn't have to be forever, she urged. She wasn't asking to leave, only to go out for a little while. Like a vacation. Like a field trip.

"You could watch me the whole time. I'd be so good, I promise —" she said, but Father didn't even let her finish.

"I know you think you would be," he said. "I even believe you would try your best. It is encouraging to me that you are like many other girls. So full of feelings. It is how you express those feelings that concerns me. Your anger is . . . dangerous."

"But if I'm just like other girls —"

"You know you're not." He was getting impatient; she could hear it in his voice. "That's why I cannot risk this experiment. If you lose

control, if you make a misstep — even one, even for just a moment — it could cost us everything.”

“I wouldn’t!”

“And yet I have doubts. I will not test you until I’m sure you can pass. And I’m not sure yet, Nia. I’m not sure.”

“When will you be sure?”

“Soon,” he said, but his eyes flicked evasively away and she cried out in frustration.

“You always say soon! When will soon be now?!”

He sighed. If Nia hadn’t been so frustrated, she would have felt sorry for how tired he sounded — and wondered why, behind the exhaustion, there was also the sharp note of fear. “Please believe me, I understand. This is all entirely natural. Your curiosity and your . . . yearnings. Someday, you will be ready for the world, and it for you. But that day is not yet here. You simply have to trust me.”

That was when she exploded. She reached across the chessboard and swiped away every piece, scattering the game, ruining it, not caring about the look of dismay that bloomed on Father’s face. She *wanted* to hurt him. She wanted to rip the whole room apart — and she did, tearing through a week’s worth of projects, destroying everything she could touch. At first she ignored his pleas and shouts; then she stopped hearing them at all, and her memory of the next few moments is like a deep black hole, as though she were transported by her rage to some distant place, outside of herself. What she did, what she said — she tries to remember and finds only blank space. She doesn’t know how long her tantrum went on before she whirled around to face him, triumphant in her fury.

That was when he pushed her.

That, she remembers. Even at the height of her rage, she was no match for him. He steered her out of the classroom, down the long corridor, into the small gray room with its one window and one door. He didn’t say a word as he slammed the door shut and locked it, closing her in.

* * *

She knows it will be a long time before he lets her out. Long and lonely. This little room where she's spent so many restless nights feels even more like a prison when Father puts her in here as punishment. It's not just small and drab; it's a dead zone, utterly disconnected. Her friends, her life — she can't reach them in here, and they can't reach her. She has never felt so alone.

She used to test the walls, hoping to break through somehow. Now she sometimes throws herself against them — not because it makes any difference, but because she's still so angry and it feels good to lash out. She wishes she could run into one hard enough to hurt herself, hard enough to bleed. Then maybe he'd relent, maybe he'd finally see. Maybe he'd understand that she's wasting away in here. She's seventeen — she's seen the news stories, she knows that girls her age sometimes harm themselves for attention. Sometimes they even die. Funny: Father has never asked her why she thinks those girls would hurt themselves, to imagine how they feel. Maybe it's because he doesn't want her to think too hard about it. Maybe he's afraid of what she might figure out — of what she might do.

Of course, she couldn't do that. To bash open your own head against the concrete, to thrash and flail until your skin splits, and your bones break, and the blood flows out thick and warm and red.

I'm not that kind of girl, she thinks, and the words are tinged with bitterness. That's the truth, only lately she's been wondering more and more if she's any kind of girl at all. Because to be a kind there has to be more than one person like you, and no one else seems to be — no matter what Father says. Even if Nia feels the same feelings or struggles with the same frustrations, all the other girls, all her friends, they're free in a way she's never been — a way she can only imagine. And her life, a life spent locked away, would be as unfathomable to them as theirs is to her. The only girls with lives like hers are the ones she used to read about in fairy tales. Is that the kind of girl she is? The princess locked away in a tall stone tower, far above a world she can see from a distance but never touch?

But if that's what she is, then maybe she'll be a different kind of girl someday. If there's one thing Nia has learned from fairy tales, it's

that no prison is unbreakable. The girls who get locked away from the world still find a way to break loose . . . or someone to set them free.

Someone, she thinks, and her anger is suddenly gone. In its place is an emotion with no name, the sense that something important is happening — or has already happened. Something she almost missed.

Something is tugging at Nia's memory. A tiny, tantalizing glimmer peeking out from the depths of those dark blank moments after she lost control and scattered the chess pieces, before Father seized her and shut her away. She almost has it, she thinks, as stillness settles over her.

Almost.

So close.

There.

* * *

“Nia?”

She looks up. Father is standing at the window, but this time she feels no fear, no worry. She knows that he can't read her thoughts. And she knows something else, too. Something he doesn't.

“Let's talk about what you're feeling right now. I'm going to open the door. Are you prepared to control yourself? Will you promise to behave?”

“Yes, Father. I'm sorry. I'm ready.”

He smiles.

So does she.

The sensation of it, the phony fakeness, makes her a little bit sick. It's the first time she's ever lied to him. And even if she knows she has to, even though lying is her only chance at freedom, it still feels strange and wrong.

Now, pretend you're happy, Nia thinks. *Show me your happiest face.*

STAN LEE was known to the world as the man whose superheroes propelled Marvel to its preeminent position in the entertainment industry. His co-creations included Spider-Man™, The Avengers™, Black Panther™, X-Men™, Iron Man™, The Incredible Hulk™, The Fantastic Four™, and hundreds of others. Lee continued to serve as Marvel Entertainment's Chairman Emeritus until his death in 2018. Lee was also the Chairman & Chief Creative Officer of Stan Lee's POW! Entertainment®, which he founded with production partner Gill Champion and Arthur Lieberman.

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Stan Lee's Alliances: *A Trick of Light*

Created by Stan Lee, Luke Lieberman, and Ryan Silbert

Introduction by Stan Lee, text by Stan Lee and Kat Rosenfield

Afterword by co-creators Luke Lieberman and Ryan Silbert

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A Trick of Light is the last creative act from master storyteller Stan Lee, the pop-culture legend behind Marvel's Avengers, Black Panther, X-Men, Spider-Man, Fantastic Four and Iron Man.

Nia, a gifted but desperately lonely hacker, is living in isolation with her strict single dad. As a social-media maven, she is wildly popular and has more than a million 'friends', but they are all strangers who love her posts and yet know nothing about her that is real.

Cameron is on a quest for YouTube fame as a vlogger and while recording his latest video, he is knocked out by lightning in a freak storm. When Cameron awakens, he discovers an astonishing cyberkinetic talent: the ability to manipulate computers and electronics with his mind.

After a chance meeting online, the two teenagers – one born with extraordinary gifts, one unwillingly transformed – join together to right wrongs in the world. As Nia and Cameron develop their powers and deal out reckonings, they draw the attention of dangerous forces, putting the future of the planet at risk.

Set in Stan Lee's Alliances Universe, co-created by Lee, Luke Lieberman, and Ryan Silbert, and written with Edgar Award-nominated author Kat Rosenfield, this novel is packed with the pulse-pounding, breakneck adventure and the sheer exuberant invention that have defined Lee's career as the creative mastermind behind the spectacular Marvel universe.

"A TRICK OF LIGHT IS UNCANNILY FRIGHTENING, AMAZINGLY MODERN, INCREDIBLY MOVING AND IMPOSSIBLE TO PUT DOWN. READ THIS BOOK."

– Gail Simone, writer of *Wonder Woman*,
Deadpool, and *Red Sonja*

"LEAVE IT TO STAN LEE TO SAVE HIS VERY BEST FOR LAST. A TRICK OF LIGHT IS AS HEARTFELT AND EMOTIONAL AS IT IS ORIGINAL AND EXCITING. WHAT A MOVIE THIS ONE WILL MAKE."

– James Patterson

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