



THE CONDENSED VERSION OF MY STORY IS THIS:

The girl with the long golden hair, or Goldilocks, as they would eventually call me, was awakened by one of the three bears. She had no memory of how she got there. She sat on their furniture, ate their food and slept in their home. They found her, talked to her, and ultimately chased her away. That is the story they tell.

But there are things they didn't tell you. The stories never mention that I had been intentionally sent there to find the Baer family's weaknesses and use them to then destroy their group. No one ever said that I would fall for the youngest. Nobody talked about how he would try to save me, even when I couldn't be saved. And they never said my entire world would come crashing down around me as I tried to save him and betray the only family I had left.

I am Acluria, and this is my real story.

K.M. ROBINSON

adopting a name, rules, and borders. The problem was that Aloysius Diamond was less of a leader and more of a dictator. His son, Robert, adopted his policies and today we find ourselves in a precarious state of survival.

My father, a politician and leader, tried to overthrow the Commander to help set up a democracy, something none of our broken pieces of the country have seen in a long time. My father failed.

But there would be far too much of an uproar if the Commander had killed my father, even if it seemed like an accident. No, my father's life was safe. Mine, however, was fair game.

So now I stand before a mirror, my long dress swishing around my feet, waiting to be summoned. Brides wear white. I used tea to stain mine an *offwhite* color. I refuse to be the bride they say I should be.

We all have to get married at some point, and usually we aren't given much of a choice as to whom it is we marry. I have no choice; Roan Diamond will be coming for me any moment.

I answer the knock at the door to find not Roan, but my father. This may be the last time I see him.

His face is washed with concern and he's fighting back tears. "Jade," he says, enveloping me in his arms. "I'm so, so sorry,

my baby girl.”

His voice is muffled against my swept-up hair.

“I’ll be all right, Daddy,” I try to soothe him, hugging him tighter.

“Remember what we talked about.”

I’m sure we’re being monitored, so we can’t speak freely.

I’ve been preparing for this moment since the minute it was decided over ten years ago. I know that the Commander is going to try to hurt me. I know his son will be a part of it. I know my death will probably look accidental. And I know it is my job to survive: my father cannot help me once I walk through those doors.

I am prepared for the monster I am about to marry, for the prison I am about to live in, and for the killer who will be known as my father-in-law. I will not go down without a fight.

My father slips away and I want to cling to him as if I am five again. If only he hadn’t been so motivated to protect everyone else, he could have protected me.

A knock sounds almost immediately and I rush back, thinking it must be my father returning. Instead I look into the green eyes of the man who is stealing my life.

My breath catches in my throat and I force myself to hold his gaze for a moment.

“Who are you?” I asked again, softer this time.

“I’m Dov.” He placed his hand over his heart as he spoke. “You know me.”

Breathing heavily, I tried to calm my gasping.

“Why am I here?”

“You came here. You came with me. You don’t remember?”

“No.” I didn’t remember anything about him.

“We only just met yesterday. You’ve had quite an experience.” He spoke softly to me, as if trying to calm a child. “It’s okay that you don’t remember. You will.”

He couldn’t have been much older than me, maybe a year or two. The man was tall when he was standing. I could tell even from down on the floor. He had long, strong arms. Something about the way he brushed the hair back out of his eyes set me at ease.

I started to stand and he rose with me. He never took his eyes off me.

“And just how did we meet, *Dov*?”

“Come. Sit down and I’ll tell you. Would you like something to drink? Water perhaps?”



"FIND HER...IF YOU CAN." THE WORDS SCROLLED across the screen of the device before crackling away.

Fet looked down in disgust, tempted to throw the device across the room. Instead, she tucked it into the pocket of her skirt and stood so quickly she nearly toppled the screen in front of her.

The light from the screen bounced off the ceiling of the dark room, lit only by glowing computers. The display wall illuminated the right side of Fet's coworker harshly as she looked up from where she was secretly slipping into the innermost workings of a government technology system for her superiors.

"Fet?" the girl asked her boss.

"Never mind, T," she said as softly as the hard edge that resided in her voice would allow. "Go back to work, I'll handle this."

"What's wrong?" a tall, lanky guy in glasses asked from across the room.

"It doesn't matter, BB, I'm handling it." Fet glared, flicking her wrist in his direction. She had no time for his emotional attachment to her unexpected problem. Her eyes darted to where the message had been on her screen only moments before.

"You tell us right now, or..."

"Or *what*?" Fet bellowed "What will you do, BB? Hack me?"

"Ha. I'd like to see him try," T snickered.

"Shut up, T. Clearly something is happening here and she's not telling us. If I have to take this to Peep, I will," the boy threatened to run to his girlfriend.

Fet raised her eyebrow in a challenge. She knew what BB did not: their leader wasn't there.



"GO HIDE, PEST," SHE ADDRESSED HIM as the building fell into view. Spider slipped behind a hedge of bushes, blending into the dark branches as Fet made her way to the metallic grey structure.

Launching herself onto the stairs, she swung up onto the ledge. Kicking her feet off of the stairway railing, Fet steadied herself on the edge of the building, disappearing from Spider's limited view.

"There," she muttered as she located the panel once safely on the roof. Pulling open the covering, she searched the screen looking for the coded message. Finding nothing, she rocked back on her heels.

After a moment, Fet grabbed a rock. She dragged its edge along the screen. Peeling the blank piece back, she revealed a secondary screen, blinking alive with its newfound freedom.

As she began to type, a code appeared on the screen, racing as she decoded its message. Fet's brow creased, her frown deepening as she deciphered the symbols. The code was tough—not even many of the Legends could crack it given the opportunity.

"This doesn't make sense," she announced to herself as her fingers flew over the board. "What is this?"

"Finish it." The command scrolled across the screen, interrupting the coding.

"But this will..." She didn't finish her thought, knowing it would fall on deaf ears, if she could be heard *at all*.

Her fingers hesitated, hovering just over the keys. With final keystroke, it would be done and the entire town would be

but we will not lend ourselves to his victory. He shall have no satisfaction from our reactions. And in that moment, I know what I must do.

I glance to my father and his eyes are trained on me.

I am changing the plan on him. I have to make him understand.

I smile; a forced smile at first, but I let it morph into the smile he has known my entire life. He squints a touch before straightening his face.

When I turn back to Roan, I lean in. My hands are in his and I let my excited energy flow through them to his hands. I catch his eye and let mine sparkle.

Today is my wedding day and I love this man.

And I will make him believe it. He will know I am in love with him, for that is how I will survive.

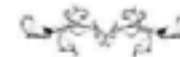


Roan's eyes widen when he sees me lean in. His smile seems so genuine. I know it's nothing; it can't be. I will fight him with the very thing he isn't expecting: adoration.

We say our vows and I clutch his hands in mine. When we turn, I loop my arm through his to leave. I catch my father's

so often, making sure I wasn't going to pass out from my injury the previous day.

The quiet that stretched between us was almost comforting. I've always liked the silence. It means that you are comfortable enough with a person that you don't feel the need to fill up the space with words. You can just exist together.



Berwyn and Eden didn't make another appearance until that evening. Dov had suggested I take a nap to help regain my strength, so after lunch I lay on the couch under a light blanket. It really was too warm for a blanket, but I liked the protection it offered me.

I never truly drifted off to sleep. While I felt safe in that house, I knew I didn't really know these people very well and I didn't want to trust them too quickly.

"She's still here," Berwyn grumbled.

"I told you, we're not sending her back out there. She's being hunted and she can't remember by whom or why. We have to protect