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Mischling

Written by Affinity Konar

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MISCHLING

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PART ONE

STASHA

CHAPTER ONE

World After World

We were made, once. My twin, Pearl, and me. Or, to be precise, Pearl was formed and I split from her. She embossed herself on the womb; I copied her signature. For eight months we were afloat in amniotic snowfall, two rosy mittens resting on the lining of our mother. I couldn't imagine anything grander than the womb we shared, but after the scaffolds of our brains were ivoried and our spleens were complete, Pearl wanted to see the world beyond us. And so, with newborn pluck, she spat herself out of our mother.

Though premature, Pearl was a sophisticated prankster. I assured myself that it was just one of her tricks; she'd be back to laugh at me. But when Pearl failed to return, I lost my breath. Have you ever had to live with the best part of yourself adrift, stationed at some unknowable distance? If so, I am sure you are aware of the dangers of this condition. After my breath left me, my heart followed suit, and my brain ran with an unthinkable fever. In my fetal pinkness, I faced this truth: without her, I would become a split and unworthy thing, a human incapable of love.

That is why I followed my sister's lead and allowed the doctor's hands to tear me out and smack me and hold me to the light. Let us note that I never cried during the ruptures of this unwanted tran-

sition. Not even when our parents ignored my wish to be named Pearl too.

I became Stasha instead. And with the chore of birth complete, we entered the world of family and piano and book, of days that baffled by in beauty. We were so alike—we were always dropping marbles from the window onto the paving stones and watching them descend the hill with our binoculars, just to see how far their little lives would take them.

That world, teeming with awe, ended too. Most worlds do.

But I must tell you: There was another world we knew. Some say it was the world that made us the most. I want to say that they are wrong, but for now, let me tell you that our entry into this world began in our twelfth year of life, when we were huddled side by side in the back of a cattle car.

During that journey of four days and four nights, we cheated our way into survival under Mama's and Zayde's instruction. For sustenance, we passed an onion back and forth and licked its yellow hide. For entertainment, we played the game Zayde made for us, a game called the Classification of Living Things. In this form of charades, you had to portray a living thing, and the players had to name the species, the genus, the family, and so on, all the way to the encompassing brilliance of a kingdom.

The four of us passed through so many living things in the cattle car; we postured from bear to snail and back—it was important, Zayde emphasized in his thirst-cracked voice, that we organize the universe to the best of our too-human ability—and when the cattle car finally came to a stop I stopped my charade too. The way I remember it, I was in the middle of trying to convince Mama that I was an amoeba. It's possible that I was portraying some other living thing and that I am remembering it as an amoeba now only because I felt so small in that moment, so translucent and fragile. I cannot be sure.

Just as I was about to admit defeat, the door to the cattle car rolled open.

And the incoming light was so startling that we dropped our onion on the floor, and it rolled down the ramp, a smelly and half-eaten moon that landed at the feet of a guard. I imagine that his face was full of disgust, but I couldn't see it—he held a kerchief over his nostrils while issuing a series of sneezes, and he stopped sneezing only to hover his boot above our onion and cast an eclipsing shadow over the tiny globe. We watched the onion weep as he crushed it, its tears a bitter pulp. He then resumed his approach, and we scrambled to hide in the shelter of Zayde's voluminous coat. Though we had outgrown Zayde as a hiding place long ago, fear made us smaller, and we contorted within the coat folds beside his dwindled body, leaving our grandfather a lumpy, many-legged figure. In this shelter, we blinked. Then we heard a sound—a stomp, a shuffle—the guard's boots were immediately before us.

"What kind of insect are you?" he asked Zayde, rapping each of the girlish legs that emerged beneath the coat with a walking stick. Our knees smarted. Then the guard struck Zayde's legs too. "Six legs? You are a spider?"

It was clear that the guard had no real understanding of living things at all. Already, he'd made two errors. But Zayde didn't bother to point out that spiders aren't insects and that, in fact, they are possessors of eight legs. Traditionally, Zayde enjoyed issuing playful, singsong corrections, as he liked to see all the facts put to rights. In that place, though—it was too dangerous to express any intimate knowledge of creatures that crawled or were considered lowly, lest you be accused of bearing too much in common with them. We should have known better than to make an insect of our grandfather.

"I asked you a question," the guard insisted while issuing another rap to our legs with his stick. "What kind?"

In German, Zayde gave him facts: His name was Tadeusz Zamorski. He was sixty-five years old. He was a Polish Jew. He ended there, as if all were told.

And we wanted to continue for him, we wanted to give all the details: Zayde was a former professor of biology. He'd taught the subject at universities for decades but was an expert in many things. If you wanted to know about the insides of a poem, he would be the one to ask. If you wanted to know how to walk on your hands or find a star, he'd show you. With him, we once saw a rainbow that ran only red, saw it straddle a mountain and a sea, and he toasted the memory of it often. *To unbearable beauty!* he'd cry, eyes abrim. He was so fond of toasts that he made them indiscriminately, for nearly any occasion. *To a morning swim! To the lindens at the gate!* And in recent years, there was this, his most common toast: *To the day my son returns, alive and unchanged!*

But as much as we would have liked to, we said nothing of these things to the guard—the details caught in our throats, and our eyes were tearful because of the death of the nearby onion. The tears were the onion's fault, we told ourselves, nothing more, and we wiped the drops away so that we could see what was happening through the holes in Zayde's coat.

Encircled in the portholes of these flaws were five figures: three little boys, their mother, and a white-coated man who stood with a pen cocked over a little book. The boys intrigued us—we'd never seen triplets before. In Lodz, there had been another set of girl twins, but a trio was the stuff of books. Though we were impressed by their number, we had to admit that we trumped them in terms of identicality. All three had the same dark curls and eyes, the same spindly bodies, but they wore different expressions—one squinted at the sun, while the other two frowned, and their faces fell into similarity only when the white-coated man distributed candy into each of their palms.

The triplets' mother was different than all the other mothers of the cattle car—her distress was neatly tucked away, and she stood as still as a stopped clock. One of her hands drifted over her sons' heads in some perpetual hesitation, as if she felt that she no longer had the right to touch them. The white-coated man did not share this attitude.

He was an intimidating figure, all shiny black shoes and dark hair of equal polish, his sleeves so expansive that when he lifted an arm, the fabric below billowed and winged and claimed a disproportionate measure of sky. He was movie-star handsome and prone to dramatics; kindly expressions swelled across his face with obviousness, as if he was eager to let everyone near know the extremity of his good intentions.

Words passed between the mother and the white-coated man. They seemed like agreeable words, though the man did most of the talking. We wished we could hear the conversation, but it was enough, I suppose, to see what happened next: the mother passed her hands over the dark clouds of the triplets' hair, and then she turned her back, leaving the boys with the white-coated man.

He was a doctor, she said as she walked away, a falter in her step. They would be safe, she assured them, and she did not look back.

Our mother, hearing this, gave a little squeak and a gasp before reaching over to tug at the guard's arm. Her boldness was a shock. We were used to a trembling mother, one who always shook while making requests of the butcher and hid from the cleaning woman. Always, it was as if pudding ran through her veins, making her constantly aquiver and defeatable, especially since Papa's disappearance. In the cattle car, she'd steadied herself only by drawing a poppy on the wooden wall. Pistil, petal, stamen—she drew with a strange focus, and when she stopped drawing, she went to pieces. But on the ramp she discovered a new solidity—she stood stronger than the starved and weary should ever stand. Was the music responsible for this alteration? Mama always loved music, and this place was teem-

ing with bright notes; they found us in the cattle car and drew us out with a distrustful cheer. Over time, we'd learn the depths of this trick and know to beware of the celebratory tune, as it held only suffering at its core. The orchestra had been entrusted with the deception of all that entered. They were compelled, these musicians, to use their talents to ensnare the unwitting, to convince them that where they had arrived was a place not entirely without an appreciation for the humane and the beautiful. Music—it uplifted the arriving crowds, it flowed beside them as they walked through the gates. Was this why Mama was able to be bold? I would never know. But I admired her courage as she spoke.

"It is good here—to be a double?" she asked the guard.

He gave her a nod and turned to the doctor, who was squatting in the dust so that he could address the boys at eye level. The group appeared to be having the warmest of chats.

"Zwillinge!" the guard called to him. "Twins!"

The doctor left the triplets to a female attendant and strode over to us, his shiny boots disrupting the dust. He was courtly with our mother, taking her hand as he addressed her.

"You have special children?" His eyes were friendly, from what we could see.

Mama shifted from foot to foot, suddenly diminished. She tried to withdraw her hand from his grasp but he held it tight, and then he began to stroke her palm with his gloved fingertips, as if it were some wounded, but easily soothed, thing.

"Only twins, not triplets," she apologized. "I hope they are enough."

The doctor's laugh was loud and showy and it echoed within the caverns of Zayde's coat. We were relieved when it subsided so that we could listen to Mama rattling off our gifts.

"They speak some German. Their father taught them. They'll turn thirteen in December. Healthy readers, the both of them.

Pearl loves music—she is quick, practical, studies dance. Stasha, my Stasha"—here Mama paused, as if unsure how to categorize me, and then declared—"she has an imagination."

The doctor received this information with interest, and requested that we join him on the ramp.

We hesitated. It was better within the suffocations of the coat. Outside, there was a gray, flame-licked wind that alerted us to our grief, and a scorched scent that underpinned it; there were guns casting shadows and dogs barking and drooling and growling as only dogs bred for cruelty can. But before we had a chance to withdraw farther, the doctor pulled aside the curtains of the coat. In the sunlight, we blinked. One of us snarled. It might have been Pearl. It was probably me.

How could it be, the doctor marveled, that these perfect features could be wasted on such dour expressions? He drew us out, made us turn for him, and had us stand back to back so he could appreciate the exactitudes of us.

"Smile!" he instructed.

Why did we obey this particular order? For our mother's sake, I suppose. For her, we grinned, even as she clung to Zayde's arm, her face lit with panic, two drops of sweat tripping down her forehead. Ever since we'd entered the cattle car, I'd avoided looking at our mother. I looked at the poppy she drew instead; I focused on the fragile bloom of its face. But something about her false expression made me acknowledge what Mama had become: a pretty but sleepless semi-widow, faded in her personhood. Once the primmest of women, she was undone; dust streaked her cheek, her lace collar lay limp. Dull gems of blood secured themselves to the corners of her lips where she'd gnawed on them in worry.

"They are *mischlinge?*" he asked. "That yellow hair!"

Mama pulled at her dark curls, as if ashamed of their beauty, and shook her head.

"My husband—he was fair" was all she could say. It was the only answer she had when asked about the coloring that made certain onlookers insist that our blood was mixed. As we'd grown, that word *mischling*—we heard it more and more, and its use in our presence had inspired Zayde to give us the Classification of Living Things. Never mind this Nuremberg abomination, he'd say. He'd tell us to ignore this talk of mixed breeds, crossed genetics, of quarter-Jews and kindred, these absurd, hateful tests that tried to divide our people down to the last blood drop and marriage and place of worship. When you hear that word, he'd say, dwell on the variation of all living things. Sustain yourself, in awe of this.

I knew then, standing before the white-coated doctor, that this advice would be difficult to take in the days to come, that we were in a place that did not answer to Zayde's games.

"Genes, they are funny things, yes?" the doctor was saying.

Mama, she didn't even try to engage him in this line of conversation.

"If they go with you"—and here she would not look at us—"when will we see them again?"

"On your Sabbath," the doctor promised. And then he turned to us and exclaimed over our details—he loved that we spoke German, he said, he loved that we were fair. He didn't love that our eyes were brown, but this, he remarked to the guard, could prove useful—he leaned in still closer to inspect us, extending a gloved hand to stroke my sister's hair.

"So you're Pearl?" His hand dipped through her curls too easily, as if it had done so for years.

"She's not Pearl," I said. I stepped forward to obscure my sister, but Mama pulled me away and told the doctor that, indeed, he had named the right girl.

"So they like to play tricks?" He laughed. "Tell me your secret—how do you know who is who?"

"Pearl doesn't fidget" was all Mama would say. I was grateful that she didn't elaborate on our identifiable differences. Pearl wore a blue pin in her hair. I wore red. Pearl spoke evenly. My speech was rushed, broken in spots, riddled with pause. Pearl's skin was as pale as a dumpling. I had summer flesh, as spotty as a horse. Pearl was all girl. I wanted to be all Pearl, but try as I might, I could only be myself.

The doctor stooped to me so that we could be face to face.

"Why would you lie?" he asked me. Again, there was his laugh, tinged with the familial.

If I was honest, I would have said that Pearl was—to my mind—the weaker of the two of us, and I thought I could protect her if I became her. Instead, I gave him a half-truth.

"I forget which one I am sometimes," I said lamely.

And this is where I don't remember. This is where I want to wander my mind back and under, past the smell, past the thump-bump of the boots and the suitcases, toward some semblance of a good-bye. Because we should have seen our loves go missing, we should have been able to watch them leave us, should have known the precise moment of our loss. If only we'd seen their faces turning from us, a flash of eye, a curve of cheek! A face turning—they would never give us that. Still, why couldn't we have had a view of their backs to carry with us, just their backs as they left, only that? Just a glimpse of shoulder, a flash of woolen coat? For the sight of Zayde's hand, hanging so heavy at his side—for Mama's braid, lifting in the wind!

But where our loved ones should have been, we had only the introduction to this white-coated man, Josef Mengele, the same Mengele who would become, in all his many years of hiding, Helmut Gregor, G. Helmuth, Fritz Ulmann, Fritz Hollman, Jose Mengele, Peter Hochbicler, Ernst Sebastian Alves, Jose Aspiazi, Lars Balltroem, Friedrich Edler von Breitenbach, Fritz Fischer,

Karl Geuske, Ludwig Gregor, Stanislaus Prosky, Fausto Rindon, Fausto Rondon, Gregor Schklastro, Heinz Stobert, and Dr. Henrique Wollman.

The man who would bury his death-dealing within these many names—he told us to call him Uncle Doctor. He made us call him by this name, once, then twice, just so we could all be acquainted, with no mistakes. By the time we finished repeating the name to his satisfaction, our family had vanished.

And when we saw the absence where Mama and Zayde once stood, an awareness collapsed me at the knees, because I saw that this world was inventing a different order of living things. I did not know then what kind of living thing I would become, but the guard didn't let me have a chance to think about it—he grasped my arm and dragged me till Pearl assured him that she'd support me, and she put her arm around my waist as we were led away with the triplets, away from the ramp and into the dust, onto a little road that led past the sauna and toward the crematoria, and as we marched into this new distance with death rising up on either side of us, we saw bodies on a cart, saw them heaped and blackened, and one of the bodies—it was reaching out its hand, it was grasping for something to hold, as if there were some invisible tether in the air that only the near-dead could see. The body's mouth moved. We saw the pinkness of a tongue as it flapped and struggled. Words had abandoned it.

I knew how important words were to a life. If I gave the body some of mine, I thought, it would be restored.

Was I stupid to think this? Or feebleminded? Would the thought have occurred to me in a place free of flame-licked winds and white-winged doctors?

These are fair questions. I think of them often, but I have never tried to answer them. The answers don't belong to me.

All I know: I stared at the body, and the only words I could summon weren't my own. They were from a song I'd heard played on

a smuggled record player in our ghetto basement. Whenever I'd heard the song, it had improved me. So I gave these words a try.

"'Would you like to swing on a star?'" I sang to the body.

Not a sound, not a stir. Was it the fault of my squeaky voice? I tried again.

"'Carry moonbeams home in a jar?'" I sang.

It was pathetic of me to try, I know, but I had always believed in the world's ability to right itself, just like that, with a single kindness. And when kindness is not around, you invent new orders and systems to believe in, and there, in that moment—whether it was stupidity or feeblemindedness—I believed in a body's ability to animate itself with the breath of a word. But it was obvious that these lyrics were not the right words at all. None of them could unlock the life of the body or were powerful enough to repair it. I searched for another word, a good word, to give—there had to be a word, I was sure of it—but the guard wouldn't let me finish. He pulled me away and forced us to press on, anxious to have us showered and processed and numbered so that our time in Mengele's zoo could begin.

Auschwitz was built to imprison us. Birkenau was built to kill us. Mere kilometers bridged their attached evils. What this zoo was designed for, I did not know—I could only swear that Pearl and I, we would never be caged.

The barracks of the Zoo were once stables for horses, but now they were heaped with the likes of us: twins, triplets, quints. Hundreds upon hundreds of us, all packed into beds that weren't beds but matchboxes, little slots to slip bodies into; we were piled from floor to ceiling, forced into these minute structures three or four bodies at a time so that a girl hardly knew where her body ended and another's began.

Everywhere we looked there was a duplicate, an identical. All girls. Sad girls, toddler girls, girls from faraway places, girls who could have been our neighborhood's girls. Some of these girls were quiet; they posed like birds on their straw mattresses and studied us. As we walked past them on their perches, I saw the chosen, the ones selected to suffer in certain ways while their other halves remained untouched. In nearly every pair, one twin had a spine gone awry, a bad leg, a patched eye, a wound, a scar, a crutch.

When Pearl and I sat on our own bunk, the mobile ones descended on us. They scrambled over the rickety corrals with their straw mattresses and appraised our similarities. Demands of our identities were made.

We were from Lodz, we told them. First, a house. Then, a basement in the ghetto. We had a grandpapa, a mother. Once, there had been a father. And Zayde had an old spaniel that could play dead when you pointed a finger at him, but he was easily brought back to life. Did we mention that our father was a doctor who helped others so much that he disappeared one night, that he left us to tend to a sick child and never returned? Yes, we missed him so much we could not even divide the weight of our grief between us. There were other things we dreaded too: germs, unhappy endings, Mama weeping. And there were things we loved: pianos, Judy Garland, Mama weeping less. But who were we really, in the end? There wasn't much to say beyond the fact that one of us was a good dancer, and the other one tried to be good but wasn't really good at anything except being curious. That one was me.

Satisfied by this information, the others offered their own in a clamor of sentence-finishing.

"We get more food here," began Rachel, a girl so pale that you could nearly see through her.

"But it's not kosher and it eats your insides," her equally transparent half pointed out.

"We keep our hair," noted Sharon, pulling on her braid for show.

"Until the lice come," added her shorn sister.

"We get to keep our clothes too," contributed one of the Russians.

"But they put crosses on our backs," finished her double. She turned so I could see the cross that blared in red paint on her dress, but I needed no illustration. A red cross stood between my shoulder blades too.

The children hushed abruptly, and the uninvited silence hung over us all—it was as if a new cloud had installed itself within the rafters of the Zoo. The many doubles looked at each other searchingly—there had to be something, their faces said, something more than food and hair and clothes. Then a voice piped up from the bunk below us. We craned to see the speaker, but she and her twin were curled up together, flush with the brick wall. We never came to know her face, but her words stayed with us always.

"They keep our families safe for us," said this unseen stranger.

At this, all the girls nodded their approval, and Pearl and I were overwhelmed by a new rush of conversation as everyone congratulated one another on belonging to families who would remain intact, unlike so many.

I didn't want to ask the obvious. So I pinched Pearl to make her ask for us.

"Why are we more important than the others?" Her voice shrank as it approached the end of the question.

A flurry of answers rose, all having something to do with purpose and greatness, with purity and beauty and being of use. We didn't hear a single one that made sense.

And before I could even try to understand this concept, the *blokowa* assigned to look after us entered. Behind her prodigious back, we called this person Ox; she had the appearance of a wardrobe with a toupee and tended toward foot-stamping and

nostril-flaring when caught in one of her passionate rants, which our supposed disobedience frequently inspired. When Pearl and I were first introduced to her, however, she was just a figure popping her head in at the door, half shrouded in night and offended by our questions.

"Why are we called the Zoo?" I asked. "Who decided this?"

Ox shrugged. "It is not obvious to you?"

I said that it was not. The zoos we'd read about with Zayde were sites of preservation that presented the vastness of life. This place, it cared only for the sinister act of collection.

"It is a name that pleases Dr. Mengele" was all Ox would say. "You won't find many answers here. But sleep! That's something you can have. Now let me have mine!"

If only we could have slept. But the darkness was darker than any I'd known, and the smell clung within my nostrils. A moan drifted from the bunk below, and outside there was the barking of dogs, and my stomach wouldn't stop growling back at them. I tried to amuse myself by playing one of our word games, but the shouts of the guards outside kept overpowering my alphabet. I tried to make Pearl play a game with me, but Pearl was busy tracing her fingertips over the silver web that embroidered our brick corner, the better to ignore my whispered questions.

"Would you rather be a watch that only knows the good times," I asked her, "or a watch that sings?"

"I don't believe in music anymore."

"Me neither. But would you rather be a watch—"

"Why do I have to be a watch at all? Is this my only choice?"

I wanted to argue that sometimes, as living things, as human-type people who were presumably still alive, we had to treat ourselves as objects in order to get by; we had to hide ourselves away and seek repair only when repair was safe to seek. But I chose to press on with another query instead.

"Would you rather be the key to a place that will save us or the weapon that will destroy our enemies?"

"I'd rather be a real girl," Pearl said dully. "Like I used to be."

I wanted to argue that playing games would help her feel like a real girl again, but even I wasn't sure of this fact. The numbers the Nazis had given us had made life unrecognizable, and in the dark, the numbers were all I could see, and what was worse was that there was no way to pretend them into anything less enduring or severe or blue. Mine were smudged and bleared—I'd kicked and spat; they'd had to hold me down—but they were numbers still. Pearl was numbered too, and I hated her numbers even more than mine, because they pointed out that we were separate people, and when you are separate people, you might be parted.

I told Pearl that I'd tattoo us back to sameness as soon as possible, but she only sighed the sigh traditional to moments of sisterly frustration.

"Enough with the stories. You can't tattoo."

I told her that I knew how to well enough. A sailor taught me, back in Gdańsk. I'd inked an anchor onto his left biceps.

True, it was a lie. Or a half-lie, since I had seen such an anchor-inking take place. When we'd summered at the sea, I spent my time peering into the gray recess of a tattoo parlor, its walls bordered with outlines of swallows and ships, while Pearl found a boy to hold her hand near the barnacled prow of a boat. So it was that as my sister entered into the secrecies of flesh on flesh, the pang of a palm curled within one's own, I schooled myself in the intimacies of needles, the plunge of a point so fine that only a dream could light upon its tip.

"I'll make us the same again someday," I insisted. "I just need a needle and some ink. There must be a way to get that, given that we are special here."

Pearl scowled and made a big show of turning her back to me—the bunk cried out with a creak—and her elbow flew up and jabbed me in the ribs. It was an accident—Pearl would never hurt me on purpose, if only because it would hurt her too. That was one of the biggest stings of this sisterhood—pain never belonged to just one of us. We had no choice but to share our sufferings, and I knew that in this place we'd have to find a way to divide the pain before it began to multiply.

As I realized this, a girl on the other side of the room found a light, a precious book of matches, and she decided that this scarcity would be best put to use making shadow puppets for the audience of multiples. And so it was that we drifted off to sleep with a series of shadow figures crossing the wall, walking two by two, each flanking the other, as if in a procession toward some unseen ark that might secure their safety.

So much world in the shadows there! The figures feathered and crept and crawled toward the ark. Not a single life was too small. The leech asserted itself, the centipede sauntered, the cricket sang by. Representatives of the swamp, the mountain, the desert—all of them ducked and squiggled and forayed in shadow. I classified them, two by two, and the neatness of my ability to do so gave me comfort. But as their journey lengthened, and the flames began to dim, the shadows were visited by distortions. Humps rose on their backs, and their limbs scattered and their spines dissolved. They became changed and monstrous. They couldn't recognize themselves.

Still, for as long as the light lived, the shadows endured. That was something, wasn't it?