THE NO-GIRLFRIEND RULE

1

THE WORST HALF SESSION OF SECRETS & SORCERY EVER PLAYED

Hollis Beckwith weighed the pewter miniature in the palm of her sweaty hand. It didn't look like high elf sorceress Alvena Ravenwood at all.

Beyond the lack of resemblance, Hollis wasn't sure what a character like this could really *do* in a high-fantasy setting like the Eight Realms, where adventurers wielded swords and sorcery on epic quests against evil. Her bikini top and thigh-high-split skirt weren't going to provide much protection on the battlefield, and her high heels weren't practical for traversing the continent's kingdoms. They didn't even allow her to stand up properly. The miniature leaned heavily forward, like the weight of every bad Secrets & Sorcery stereotype rested on her shoulders.

"She'll do, right?" the Secret Keeper asked.

"Uh," said Hollis.

She hadn't brought a miniature of her own, so she didn't have much choice. And if this was the first option the Secret Keeper—the game's head storyteller—had offered, Hollis was pretty sure there were no other girl miniatures in his bag.

She swallowed around the lump in her throat. "I mean, sure. Uh, thanks."

Leaning forward, the sides of her rickety folding chair protesting against her thighs, Hollis placed Bikini Alvena on the blank battle map.

All around the folding table, the other players did the same with their characters. A nervous college-aged boy across from Hollis had borrowed a miniature as well—a knightly, paint-chipped paladin wearing considerably more clothes than Bikini Alvena—which he slid beside hers. A woman in her early twenties had brought her own miniature, a hulking troll barbarian in a loincloth, which she pushed to the front of their haphazard line. A man with a weak chin and a silky wolf shirt had a figure in the same model as Alvena, but his had been painted with much more care, all the way down to her tiny, intricately shaded cleavage.

Both the miniatures and the players who placed them seemed much more at home in the cramped, dimly lit back room of Games-A-Lot—Hollis's local game store—than Hollis felt. For the past hour, she'd been trying to settle in among the sea of tables and the chatter of players gathered for tonight's open role-playing session. But it was no use. The room felt too small—or maybe Hollis just felt too big and too young. Most of the other players seemed to be at least college-aged. And they all seemed more prepared, too, with their own dice sets and game books and neatly filled-out character sheets (unlike Hollis's, which she'd scribbled in a rush earlier that same day). Moving as little as possible, Hollis cast a glance around her table for anyone else her age.

The only possibility was the boy sitting beside her, who was probably around her age—seventeen—or maybe a year younger. His bard miniature wielded an electric guitar that didn't match his doublet, tights, and foppish feathered hat. He placed the bard directly beside Alvena, its base crossing over the graph paper line and bumping up against hers.

"Hey," said the boy, leaning uncomfortably close to Hollis. "Maxx the Bard wants to know if your character is thicc like you."

What Hollis wanted to say was *Ew* and then *I don't know, is your character a creep like you?* but before she could find her voice, the Secret Keeper cleared his throat. He'd arranged a horde of goblin miniatures on the opposite side of the map, and now he began reading from the official *Realmsdelver Adventure Guide*.

"The party comes upon a group of goblins." His narration had the flat quality of someone put on the spot without time to prepare. "They stand with their crude short bows drawn but do not attack."

Finally, the moment they'd all been waiting for: combat. Since this was the first session of an open-to-the-public game, the group's role-playing had so far been stiff at best. Hollis had been silent the whole time, furtively flipping through her borrowed copy of the player's handbook as she tried to keep up. Maybe the framework of a battle would be just what the group needed to get them all on the same page.

Leaning in, Hollis opened her mouth to speak at last. She took a deep breath, and—

"'Newbs,'" the older girl cut in, pitching her voice down to a gravelly rumble to mimic her character's speech. "Axtar the Terrible's gonna run forward, his battle-axe raised high."

"Wait," said the boy playing the paladin. "We don't have to attack them. They haven't done anything yet."

"Oh, God." Maxx the Bard's player leaned in closer still. He dropped his voice, waggling an eyebrow at Hollis conspiratorially. *"Gay!"*

Hollis's folding chair creaked as she leaned away, but the table was so small that this meant leaning closer to the girl on the other side of her, and that wasn't an appealing idea either. Her muscles tensed, holding her uncomfortably in place.

"I know you're new," said Axtar's player in her regular voice, "but those are goblins. Goblins are *always* bad."

"I'm just saying," said the paladin boy, "could we at least try something other than hacking them up first? Maybe they'll let us pass through their village if we ask."

The man with the other Alvena miniature scoffed. "Yeah, right."

"While they're doing that," said the boy playing Maxx the Bard, somehow managing to loom even closer to Hollis, "can I roll to seduce Alvira? My persuasion modifier is plus 10."

Hollis froze. If she leaned any farther in her folding chair, she feared it would tip. The bland gray walls felt too close, pressing uncomfortably near to her skin.

"Come on, man," said the paladin boy. "You know S&S isn't just dice rolls and numbers! It's *collaborative storytelling*. We're supposed to be *creating* something together! Really exploring the world and playing our characters, and—"

"Ugh," said the other man. "Leave that soft-boy crap at the door."

"Okay, enough's enough," said Axtar's player. "Axtar is going to let out a guttural roar"—to demonstrate, she made a noise startling enough that several players at the more experienced tables turned their heads to look—"and then he'll chuck his axe at whatever goblin looks the meanest."

"All right." The Secret Keeper seemed thankful to finally have something concrete to do. "Make an attack roll against the goblin."

And with that, the game whirred back into motion. Players went back and forth rolling dice that Hollis wasn't sure she even *had* in the set her boyfriend had loaned her. It was as if every bit of last-minute knowledge he'd crammed into her brain was dribbling out her ears now that the time had come to use it. What Hollis wouldn't give now for it to be *him* seated next to her, instead of Maxx or Axtar, so that she could lean in and ask what she was supposed to be doing and where all this math was coming from. She wished, not

for the first time, that she was playing her first S&S game with him instead.

But his group had a rule that came before any in the player's handbook: the No-Girlfriend Rule. It barred Hollis specifically—and any other future girlfriend hypothetically—from playing in the boys' weekly S&S game.

The No-Girlfriend Rule was the only thing that had kept Hollis desperate enough to stay seated at a table full of strangers in a windowless dungeon of a room for two hours (and counting). Her eyes wandered toward the store's front door.

"Hello, earth to Elvira," came the voice of Axtar's player from beside her.

Hollis's attention swam back to the table. For an instant, she wanted to protest that her character's name was *Alvena*, but she only said, "Huh?"

"It's your turn! What did you roll?"

Hollis picked up one of her dice—the largest, with twenty sides, which her boyfriend had said was the one used for most rolls. Unsure what she was even rolling for, she shook it clumsily in her palm and let it drop to the table in front of her.

The die landed with a 1 face up—the lowest number she could have possibly rolled. Alvena would be last in the battle order. Hollis settled into her folding chair, leaning as far away from Maxx the Bard's player as possible, and waited.

As soon as the table was sent on their fifteen-minute break, Hollis texted her boyfriend:

can you please come pick me up??

Her plan was to exit Games-A-Lot as casually as possible and wait for Chris on the bench in front of the vitamin shop next door. But as she approached the front door, cold can of Dr Pepper (purchased

from Karl behind the shop counter) in hand, she stopped. The woman who played Axtar the Terrible was on the other side of the smudgy glass, smoking a cigarette and laughing with some of the other players.

Hollis was trapped in the vestibule, stuck in the stale smell of cigarette smoke, her Dr Pepper gradually warming in her hand as a nervous sweat gradually warmed her brow.

She willed her phone to buzz.

Games-A-Lot was the kind of place where Hollis had hoped she'd fit in. The shop was a shining beacon of geekdom that even its cramped, dusty shelves, poor fluorescent lighting, and run-down-strip-mall location couldn't dim. That the local game store was on this side of the river—in Hollis's hometown of Covington, Kentucky, and not the infinitely more hip and happening Cincinnati, Ohio—made it feel even more accessible. She couldn't see herself reflected in the store's hand-painted sign (which depicted a knight on horseback in front of a castle tower, a busty, freshly rescued princess riding behind him), but she had convinced herself that she *could* see herself in the back room, playing Secrets & Sorcery.

She had been wrong.

It would've been nice to say she was surprised, but in truth, what had happened tonight was exactly what Hollis had feared. Even though she'd spent a solid three weeks searching for a game, even though she'd read every comment on this group's Meetup page to vet their friendliness and general safety, even though she'd given herself a mental pep talk in her mom's car on the way here earlier, it had still ended up a disaster.

Hollis shook her head at herself and backed into the vestibule corner, trying to stay out of sight of Axtar the Terrible's player. Her back pocket buzzed and she almost dropped her Dr Pepper in her rush to retrieve her phone.

christopher: couldn't hack it huh

Fingers hovering over her screen, Hollis thought about what to type back. In a way, it was Chris's fault that all this had gone so poorly—and that Hollis was here at all. Secrets & Sorcery had been *his* game, something he'd played with the boys since the summer before ninth grade, when Hollis was as good as one of the boys herself.

But Hollis had never *really* been one of the boys. Every Monday, she'd stood on the outskirts of the group as they rehashed their Friday game blow by epic blow, good enough to listen but not to be truly included. Her status became all the more apparent halfway through freshman year, when she and Chris—tired of always being accused of it anyway—started dating. Suddenly, Secrets & Sorcery came with a No-Girlfriend Rule. And to be fair, Hollis had never cared much. Beyond stealing Chris's *Monstarium* (the S&S book that held all the lore and stats for the monsters of the Eight Realms) for art inspiration and following other artists who liked the game on social media, she was a casual fan at best.

But now senior year loomed on the horizon, and Hollis knew things were going to change, even if she didn't yet know how. Her crew (or, really, Chris's crew, which Hollis had inherited through proximity and convenience) would scatter to the corners of the country—or at least the greater Tri-State area—in just a few short months. For so many years, the boys had been all Hollis knew. And if she couldn't predict what happened next, she wanted to be part of what happened *now*.

For Chris and crew, that was Secrets & Sorcery. So Hollis had set out on her own to prove she could indeed hack it. Maybe, if she could prove herself in a game of her own, she could show Chris that she was worthy of a spot in his.

If nothing else, it would give her something to talk about on Mondays. Hollis couldn't be one of the boys, but she could at least be part of the conversation.

And that started now, with a clever reply to Chris's text. With the back of her hand, Hollis wiped her reddening cheeks, brushing away pearls of sweat. But before she could type that there had been plenty of hacking, actually, another message appeared.

christopher: omw

Well. At least her rescue was impending—and none too soon. Inside the store, the boy who played Maxx the Bard crept closer. Though he was pretending to look at the dice display on the other side of the glass (a bright spot in the dim store, featuring small, sparkling boxes of dice in every color of the rainbow), it was clear the treasure he was *really* searching out was Hollis. He grinned at her, his waggling eyebrows working overtime.

With a sudden, pressing need to look occupied and unapproachable, Hollis busied herself with the only feature in the vestibule—a community corkboard. Pushpinned on it were at least five layers of advertisements for everything from monster truck rallies to FPS-style recruitment flyers for the Army. A page of watercolor paper caught Hollis's eye. It was washed in a pleasing mix of lilac, tangerine, and buttercup. In round, not entirely neat handwriting, it read:

Looking for a roleplay-heavy, story-
driven game of Secrets & Sorcery?

I'm looking for you.
I'm starting a new girl-friendly,
LGBTQIA+-friendly campaign and need a few
more daring adventurers to join the party.
Want to roam the Realms with us?
Send me an email by August 21.

Carefully cut fringe at the bottom of the paper read *TAKE ME! gloriawith12os@gmail.com*. Only three were missing. Five were vandalized in red pen to say *1-800-BITCH.COM* instead.

Hollis read the flyer again, then once more for good measure. A strange sort of fluttering built in her chest. She wasn't sure what kind of game she was looking for, but Gloria-with-12-*Os*'s sounded much better than the one she was in the middle of walking out on. Maybe she could give it a try.

But today was the twenty-second. She'd missed the application deadline by one day.

Maybe this was a sign. Maybe she just wasn't destined to play Secrets & Sorcery. She'd always been more of a non-player character than a high-stakes adventurer, anyway.

"Hey, Alvena," said Axtar the Terrible's player as she shoved the door open and pushed past. "You coming back in, or did we scare you off?"

Her barbarian laugh told Hollis that she suspected the truth.

"No, no." Hollis's fingers tightened around her Dr Pepper can. Her chest tightened with anxiety. She blinked, suddenly acutely aware that her eyes were a little too big, and shook her head. Her hair stuck to her sweat-sheened skin where the frizz bobbled against the back of her neck. "I'll be right in, just finishing my drink."

"Yeah. Sure thing, kid."

Hollis watched human Axtar disappear into the store and hoped she never saw her again. Her back pocket vibrated.

christopher: here

christopher: where u at

Hollis typed back one-handed.

coming.

She spared one last look for the dingy game store and the adventuring party she was leaving behind. But it wasn't Maxx the Bard's player, still lurking by the glass, that caught Hollis's eye. It was the sunset-washed flyer.

Hollis reached out, fingers closing around one of the fringed tabs. She wasn't entirely sure why she did it, but she did it all the same. The weight of the paper was pleasantly thick between her thumb and index finger.

With a decisive motion, she tore it off. It ripped unevenly, leaving the *.com* behind.

Hollis tucked the slip of paper into her back pocket with her phone, and then she pushed open the door and walked away.

"And then, after she was done hacking up this goblin with her battle-axe, do you know what she did?"

Hollis leaned forward from the back seat and accepted the vanilla cone Chris handed her. This was one of the perks of dating the person who had been her best friend since middle school: he was able to tell when something was Threat Level: Vanilla Cone. Chris raised a blond eyebrow before leaning back out the window of the Sentra to get his own ice cream.

"She goes, 'And then Axtar leans in and cuts his ear off and spears it on the spike-chain necklace he wears.'" Hollis took a lick of her ice cream, which was already beginning to melt in the heat of the summer night. "Who in their right mind would do something like that?"

"Axtar, it sounds like." This came from Landon—Chris's *other* best friend and his group's Secret Keeper since freshman year—who sat in the front seat. Landon's lips rippled with a poorly suppressed smile as Chris pulled out of the McDonald's drive-through.

"I mean, can you *imagine*?" Hollis shook her head. "That ear is

going to start stinking in, like, a day. Who even knows what kind of creatures they'll have following the stench."

"They?"

"Huh?"

"You said *they*," Chris said through a mouthful of soft serve. "Don't you mean *we*?"

"Oh." Hollis frowned at her cone. Here in Chris's car, with the familiar squeal of an unreplaced belt and the crackle of his nu metal through blown-out speakers, she'd expected the events at Games-A-Lot to feel less bad. But instead, they somehow felt worse. Landon, lanky and looming in the front seat, reminded her too much of what she was supposed to prove by going to this game—and of what she hadn't.

Hollis shook her head. "No, I don't think I'll be going back again."

"Come on, Hollis," Chris chided. "Don't quit so soon. You looked for that game for weeks! You've just got a meathead barbarian. Every table has a meathead barbarian."

"Yeah." Landon looked at her through the rearview mirror. "Quitting is for quitters, Hollis."

Hollis wanted to remind them that she wouldn't have had to look for a different group at all if Chris's S&S group didn't have the No-Girlfriend Rule—and if Landon didn't gleefully enforce it. But the car, usually comfortable, felt too small from the back seat. There wasn't enough space for all of Landon's judgment—or Chris's disappointment. She swallowed a mouthful of ice cream instead.

"I mean, it wasn't just that player, though. There was this guy, around our age, who was playing this bard—"

"Oh, bards." Landon gave a short, knowing laugh.

"I swear if Axtar hadn't sliced the goblin's head open so fast, he was going to try to seduce it."

"Gay," said Chris, not unlike Maxx the Bard's player at the table.

The word had been startling enough coming from Maxx in the back of Games-A-Lot. From Chris, it was even worse. It sank like a stone in Hollis's gut.

She swallowed, trying to make it sit comfortably. But no matter what she did, it wouldn't, and so she tried to explain around it.

"Come on, Chris, he was *the worst*. He kept asking if Alvena was thicc. With two *C*s."

"Well, is she?"

"Chris." Hollis raised an eyebrow at him.

She wasn't mad, not really. This was how their relationship had always worked: Hollis found herself overwrought, and Chris said goofy things to distract her until she calmed down. It happened so often that there was a worn spot on the side of the passenger-seat upholstery where Hollis's fingers had worried the fibers thin. She couldn't feel it now—how the edge of the seat closest to the window grew threadbare at hip level—not with Landon in the front. But just knowing it was there was a kind of comfort anyway. It stilled her, softened her to Chris. He still had a chance to walk them back, especially since he had just rescued her and bought her ice cream.

"I'm kidding." Chris turned onto Hollis's street. "But that's how bards are, you know?"

"Surely not every bard is a total douchebag."

"That's literally what bards are for, as a class," Landon piped in, a bit of his own ice cream dripping down the patchy scruff on his chin. "It's basically Rules as Written."

Hollis wanted to say *Ew*, but Landon was so confident that he didn't even bother to turn around and look at her while he made his proclamation. Instead, he just glared at her through the rearview mirror, his gray eyes daring her to contradict him.

Hollis sighed and looked away. She finished the last bit of her ice cream.

"What he means is some of this comes with the territory, unfortunately." Chris pulled up in front of Hollis's house, parallel parking behind her mom's car. In the glow of the streetlight, his frizzy blond hair haloed as he shook his head. "The game's just like that."

Hollis wanted to believe he was wrong. She wanted to believe that the game her boyfriend loved enough to spend every Friday night standing her up for wasn't just *like that*. She didn't want to think that in order to share this interest—to make the most of their senior year together, to finally, really fit with the boys in a lasting way—she would have to be *like that* herself. Like Maxx, with his anachronistic bass guitar and dubious understanding of consent. Or like Axtar, with her bad attitude and knowing glances.

If the game really was just *like that*, Hollis didn't want to think about what that said about Chris. About her. Her soft serve sat uneasy in her stomach, and she suddenly felt much colder than ice cream should have made her.

"Yeah," she said, gritting her teeth against the chill. "Maybe you're right."

"I usually am," Landon said.

"Here, let me let you out," Chris said, unbuckling and opening the door. He folded his seat forward, and Hollis scrambled out.

In the hot night air, they stood eye to eye, looking at each other like they were waiting for something. The welcome sign for their neighborhood glinted over Chris's shoulder, the *E* of its mosaic-tile EASTSIDE changed by time or vandalism to an *L* so that it felt like all of Last Side was waiting for something too.

Chris was the first to move, leaning forward and pulling Hollis into a lopsided hug. From the front seat of the car, Landon hollered a long *"Wooooooooo."*

Hollis rolled her eyes, but she wrapped her arms around Chris's waist. Like the rest of him, it was neither thin nor stocky

but somewhere in between. For a moment, she stayed there, her head hovering just over Chris's shoulder, her nose twitching when his wispy blond hair tickled it, trying to muster up the courage to ask.

It was a long shot, and she knew it. Still, she asked it in a whisper so Landon couldn't hear—and so Chris *could*—how much she wanted it.

"Are you sure I can't play S&S with you on Friday?" The words were small on her tongue. "I know the rules now, and I promise I won't mess up."

The effect was immediate. Chris pulled away, cocking his head so the frizz of his blond hair poufed to one side. Around them, the cramped car-lined streets pressed in, watching as closely as Landon was from the front seat.

"You know I can't make that happen, Hol," he said. "The rules are the rules."

"I know, I know." And she did. Her heart still sank as she looked down at her feet. "It would just make it so much easier to play."

"Yeah," Chris said, "but maybe if you give the Games-A-Lot group another try, it won't be so bad. You just have to find your people."

Chris was her person; he had been since sixth grade. It would be so much easier for him to stay her person forever if he just let her play in his game.

But for Chris, the guys always came first.

Hollis looked up and tried to give him a smile anyway. Chris grinned in response, then turned back to the car. Over his shoulder, he said, "See you Monday at school, okay?"

"Oh, yeah," said Hollis. She tried to match the enthusiasm in Chris's voice when she added, "Wouldn't miss it."

Everything in Hollis's room was secondhand. The blue upholstered armchair in the corner, buried beneath a pile of clothes in various

stages of needing to be washed, she'd inherited when her grandmother moved in with her aunt. The faded quilt on her bed once belonged to her mother, and the heavy wooden bed frame had been her father's, before her parents divorced and he moved out. Even the knickknacks were mostly scavenged—interesting props left over from school plays, a jar of buttons of unknown origin, a green glass wine bottle left over from Christmas and stuffed full of twinkle lights from the thrift shop.

The only thing entirely her own was her desk. It wasn't particularly impressive—as the daughter of a teacher in a single-parent household, nothing Hollis had was—but she had put it together entirely on her own after she'd picked it out from Target at the beginning of freshman year, and it felt like *hers*. It was made of white particle board and covered in nicks and paint drips and stray pencil marks, because it was also where her art lived. And for that reason it was her most cherished possession. Hollis spent the majority of her time at home bent over it, perched in a repurposed chair from the kitchen dining set, her hand wandering over the page as her mind wandered to other worlds.

It was where she found herself soon after she'd watched Chris pull away.

Once she'd gotten home, she'd tried to draw them out—all the characters from her half session of S&S. But even Alvena Ravenwood, whose intricate robe and long, wavy hair she had imagined in careful detail for weeks, eluded her. Each time Hollis touched her pencil to a blank page in her notebook, the characters came out all wrong.

By the time she had not-finished three attempts, Hollis gave up. Pushing her notebook away, she leaned back in her chair and frowned when her phone poked her backside. Shifting, she pulled it out of her back pocket and stared.

Stuck in the cracked corner of her case was the slip of paper—the one she'd taken from the Games-A-Lot community board. In the light of her desk lamp, it seemed even nicer than it had in the vestibule. Hollis ran her fingers over the rough grain of the paper, along the line where lilac faded to buttercup. It was so much more artful than anything she'd produced in her notebook all night.

Hadn't Chris said she needed to find her people?

If he didn't believe that she could be his person, she had to *show* him she could be. The boys always seemed to be at their closest when they talked about their S&S game—as if it were *them*, not their imaginary stand-ins, adventuring together every Friday night. Hollis was sure that their ability to survive untold peril every week as a party in the game meant that they'd be able to survive whatever came after senior year, too. For her and Chris, though, there was no such certainty. Not *yet*, at least. Finding the right S&S group meant finding a way to prove herself to the person she least wanted to leave behind.

Hollis unlocked her phone and pulled up her email app. Before she could second-guess the impulse, her thumbs started to fly.

to: gloriawith12os@gmail.com
from: justhollisb@gmail.com
subject: s&s game
---

gloria with 12 o's,

as of right now, i'm 21 hours and 32 minutes late for the deadline to do this, but here goes:

i saw your flyer at games-a-lot, and i think i'm the kind of player you're looking for. or i could be, if you let me try.

i'll play whatever character you need me to play. i just really don't want to have to play with the creeps at games-a-lot anymore.

hollis b.

The moment after she finished typing, she thought about deleting the email. It was a long shot at best. And it was almost certainly too late, anyway. Whoever Gloria was, she'd probably already found enough of her own friends to fill her game by now.

Hollis's eyes drifted back to her notebook and the failed sketches of her failed S&S character. In her head, Landon's voice repeated the noise of the night in an endless loop: *She couldn't hack it; this was just how the game was; the rules were the rules and there was no room in them for Hollis.*

She took a deep breath, held it in her chest, and hit send. Then, for three full breaths, Hollis just blinked down at her phone, unsure if she was mortified or impressed by what she'd just done.

Her Secrets & Sorcery future now rested in the hands—or, more accurately, the inbox—of Gloria-with-12-*O*s.

2
SECRETS AND SERVERS

HOLLIS CHECKED HER inbox for the third time since pouring herself a bowl of cereal four minutes ago. It stayed stubbornly the same: just an advertisement for the plus-size store at the mall (*Back 2 School Babes: 100% Fashion, 50% Off!*) and Julie Murphy's most recent *Just Peachy* newsletter.

There was still no message from Gloria or her 12 *O*s.

A hollowness yawned open in Hollis's chest. She should have known. Sending that email was foolish. The lack of response was a sign that what Chris said in his text was true: she couldn't hack it. Cold dread descended on her, closing like fingers around her lungs.

Hollis shook her head and tried to keep the anxiety at bay. It was much too early in the morning for this. And maybe Gloria-with-12-*O*s hadn't even seen her message yet.

Still, she thought she'd better check her spam box. Just in case.

There it was, at the top of her screen. Hollis exhaled. The hand constricting around her rib cage released as she read *re: s&s game*.

to: justhollisb@gmail.com
from: gloriawith12os@gmail.com
subject: re: s&s game

Girl, chill.

21 hours and 32 minutes is not the end of the world. We still have a place for you at our table. We were going to do a chat on the group Discord server around 2PM today. Can you make it? Follow the link below. If not, let me know and I can email you the minutes.

Welcome to the party, Hollis B.

—G.

Hollis gave a squeal so awkward-sounding that under any other circumstance she would have been embarrassed hearing it come out of her mouth. It filled the small kitchen, bouncing off the green-painted walls and echoing down the hall.

"You okay in there, Hollis?" her mom called from the living room.

Hollis cleared her throat and reminded herself to breathe.

"Yeah, Mom. Totally fine."

Once she calmed down, Hollis typed back *yeah, sounds great, see you then* and hit send. She was so excited that she didn't even feel embarrassed for saying *see* when she wouldn't be seeing anyone or anything but text on a screen.

Was it silly to get nervous about a Discord chat?

Probably.

Was Hollis Beckwith still nervous about a Discord chat?

Absolutely.

She locked herself in her bedroom, telling her mom she had last-minute summer reading to churn out before school started

tomorrow. It was believable enough; the senior English class had been assigned a "modern" retelling of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that had probably last been modern in maybe 1997. She'd complained about it so much over the past few weeks that her mom didn't pry now.

And so Hollis had thirty minutes alone before the online meetup with her new Secrets & Sorcery group. She set up her laptop—which was almost as outdated as the *Macbeth* retelling—at her desk. She'd tried setting up in bed, where she'd be more physically comfortable for a chat of unknown duration, but it just didn't feel like the right place to be. The hard press of her thinly cushioned wooden chair was a price worth paying for the right headspace, she justified.

When she'd finished setting up—making sure she had a notebook, a good pen, and her small collection of Prismacolor markers handy, just in case—Hollis still had fifteen minutes to wait.

As she read over Gloria's email again, her stomach roiled. She didn't want to click the "join server" link too early and look as desperate as she felt. She didn't want to click it too late and look like a jerk, either. No, Hollis wanted to join the server just the right amount of time before the chat started to convey that she was taking this seriously but not too seriously and that maybe she had a life outside of an S&S group chat on a Sunday afternoon.

That time was 1:52 p.m.

When it arrived, Hollis tabbed over to the email and clicked.

----------**beckwhat** *hopped into the server.*----------

Aini 1:52 PM
Oh! Is this her?

Glooooooooooooria 1:52 PM
Yes, this is Hollis.

Welcome!

uwuFRANuwu 1:53 PM
KDJAJFHJFAJFAF

HELLOOO HOLLIS IM FRAN

iffy.elliston 1:53 PM
hey hollis

beckwhat 1:54 PM
hey everyone!!

Glooooooooooooria 1:55 PM
Aini, I know Maggie can't make it today. Can you make sure she gets up to speed when you see her next?

Aini 1:56 PM
Yeah, totally.

Glooooooooooooria 1:56 PM
Are we good to get started, then?

uwuFRANuwu 1:57 PM
YEE

beckwhat 1:57 PM
yes please!

iffy.elliston 1:58 PM
i'm a little in and out finishing up this whack summer reading but i'm here

Aini 1:58 PM
Yeah, let's do this!

Glooooooooooooria 1:59 PM
Okay, okay.

I don't need you all long today, I promise.

Let's start with a quick roll call. I'll go first.

I'm Gloria (she/her) and I'm your Secret Keeper, obviously. I've been playing Secrets & Sorcery for five years, but don't get to do a lot of actual playing because I usually Keep instead. If you have any new player questions (or old player questions), I'm your girl.

Next!

uwuFRANuwu 2:03 PM
I"M FRAN. THIS IS MY FIRST GAME!!! gloria is letting me play finallyyyyy.

oh also gloria is my sister

and a loser :/

luckily it doesnt run in teh family uwu

Aini 2:03 PM
I'm Aini (she/her). I played in Gloria's last game. Shout-out to my mom for having no chill and talking about my nerdy hobbies to exactly the right coworker . . . and to Gloria for taking me in even when her mom was like, "this woman I work with has a gay daughter who wants to play S&S with other girls."

Gloria's totally underrepresenting how awesome she is, by the way. She's the best.

uwuFRANuwu 2:04 PM
NEXT

Aini 2:04 PM
NEXT!

uwuFRANuwu 2:05 PM
lololol jinx aini

u owe me a soda

oh also i use she her pronouns uwu

Aini 2:06 PM
Rude!

I'll get you a Coke, though. 😆😆😆

Oh, we have Maggie (she/her), also. She's my school friend and she's new to the game.

Okay, NOW next.

beckwhat 2:16 PM
hey, i'm hollis (she/her). i'm new to the game too but have been a fan from afar for a while ♡♡. really excited to play!!! (edited)

next!!

iffy.elliston 2:22 PM
ugh sorry y'all macbeth is going to be the death of me i s2g

i'm iffy elliston (she/her) i've played a couple games before but they never ran very long so i'm glad to find a dedicated group

bless that game store flyer

beckwhat 2:23 PM
@iffy.elliston do you go to holmes, iffy??

iffy.elliston 2:23 PM
i do

beckwhat 2:23 PM
sweet, me too!!

iffy.elliston 2:23 PM
nice

you get your macbeth done already?

beckwhat 2:24 PM
"done" is a subjective term . . . . . .

Glooooooooooooria 2:24 PM
Take it to the DMs girls. We're talking S&S tonight!

Next on the agenda: expectations and rules.

uwuFRANuwu 2:24 PM
BORINGGGG

dont u look at me like that gloria marie

shes looking at me irl like
(ʊ^ ʊ)

Glooooooooooooria 2:25 PM
https://bit.ly/TableGuidelines

I've made a Google Doc with my expectations for table etiquette. Please read it. I trust it will be fine with everyone, because it's just basic human stuff like respect each other, don't be a transphobe or homophobe, etc. There's

a place for you to "sign" once you've read so I know you agree.

Aini 2:26 PM
I told you she was the coolest, didn't I?

Glooooooooooooria 2:27 PM
And yes, I know this is a little extra, but I'm on a gap year before college. You can take the girl out of school but you can't take the school out of the girl.

Instead of writing papers, I'm writing S&S guides.

Oh, and I'll add some information on adaptations I've made for the Eight Realms setting to make it a little more inclusive, and some character creation guidelines to keep in mind while you start brainstorming characters.

uwuFRANuwu 2:28 PM
IM GOING TO PLAY A BARBERAIN

BRABEREEIAN

THE ONE WHO SMASHES STUFF!!!!!!!

Aini 2:29 PM
I'd be disappointed by anything less, honestly, Fran.

Glooooooooooooria 2:30 PM
Actually, I'd like to get everyone together soon so we can create characters and roll stats in person, especially since a few of you are new to the game. I figure we could find a standing day and time that works for everyone and start then.

How would Friday evenings at 6PM work?

Aini 2:31 PM
I can make that work.

uwuFRANuwu 2:32 PM
YEE

duh

Aini 2:33 PM
I'll text Maggie to ask, too.

iffy.elliston 2:33 PM
i can't promise every single friday

i have gsa stuff then sometimes

but i can do most of them

beckwhat 2:35 PM
here for fridays for sure! (edited)

Glooooooooooooria 2:36 PM
Okay, okay. How's everyone's transportation situation? We'll play at my mom's house, starting this Friday. We're on the west side of Cincy, in Price Hill.

Aini 2:36 PM
I drive so I'm good.

So does Maggie.

iffy.elliston 2:36 PM
i drive too

beckwhat 2:38 PM
i don't.

ugh, i'm sorry.

i'm in covington across the river, too.

uwuFRANuwu 2:38 PM
RIP *@beckwhat*

beckwhat 2:39 PM
i can get an uber.

iffy.elliston 2:39 PM
that is nonsense

i'll come pick you up

beckwhat 2:40 PM
are you sure you don't mind?? (edited)

iffy.elliston 2:40 PM
i don't mind at all

Aini 2:41 PM
Just bring good snacks, Hollis!

As your payment.

beckwhat 2:41 PM
i'll throw in some gas money, actually.

iffy.elliston 2:42 PM
even better

Glooooooooooooria 2:43 PM
Aini brings up an important point.

uwuFRANuwu 2:43 PM
CUPCAKES

Glooooooooooooria 2:44 PM
We rotate who brings the snacks every week.

uwuFRANuwu 2:44 PM
CUPCAKES CUPCAKES

Glooooooooooooria 2:44 PM
Do you want to volunteer for the first session, Hollis?

No pressure.

beckwhat 2:45 PM
yeah sure i can bring snacks!

uwuFRANuwu 2:45 PM
CUP!!! CAKES!!!!!!

beckwhat 2:45 PM
i can even bring cupcakes.

uwuFRANuwu 2:46 PM
ur my new fave

move over aini

aini who????

Glooooooooooooria 2:46 PM
First, does anyone have food allergies/restrictions?

uwuFRANuwu 2:47 PM
i only eat cupcake U-U

Aini 2:47 PM
Maggie's vegan but she always brings her own stuff, so you're go for cupcakes as far as I'm concerned.

Glooooooooooooria 2:47 PM
Okay, okay.

That's everything then. You are a very efficient group. I think we're going to make a great team.

The only one I'm worried about is Francesca, honestly.

Aini 2:48 PM
Ahhhahahahaha!

uwuFRANuwu 2:48 PM
safjasjfkjkLJSLKJALFKJFJOIJI

how dare u

Glooooooooooooria 2:49 PM
Feel free to chat here whenever you want.

And @ me if you need me.

uwuFRANuwu 2:49 PM
ヾ(@^▽^@)ノ

Aini 2:50 PM
Bye, Gloria!

Bye, everyone!

iffy.elliston 2:51 PM
see y'all

beckwhat 2:51 PM
thank you gloria! ♡♡♡

Hollis spent the next thirty minutes rereading the entire chat log. Even when she reached the end again, she couldn't be sure what,

exactly, had just happened. All the other girls seemed to be friends (or sisters) already, which made Hollis an outsider, which didn't feel fantastic; she was already an outsider in Chris's game. Still—no one, not once, had asked her if she was thick, with or without the two *C*s, and so the group at least had that going for them.

Maybe another read would help her decide.

The wheel of her hand-me-down mouse clacked a weak protest as she scrolled back to the top of the chat log.