

Preface

Shouts and heavy footfalls pounded behind Emlyn as she sprinted up the stairway, thighs burning and chest heaving. But somehow she found the resolve to run harder, faster, and burst onto the landing.

Shaking with adrenaline, she rushed into the maze of cases and frozen monsters that crowded the long room. Atop an elaborate pedestal and inside a glass case, she found what had brought her here.

Emlyn grabbed a nearby chair and rammed it against the glass, but it held steady. A second hit made a hairline fracture. A third hit broke through, and Emlyn reached into the hole in the glass, heedless of the cutting shards as she grabbed the priceless artifact inside.

She lifted the sword, its dark crystal blade glinting in the dim lighting. The leather hilt fit her hands firmly. It was heavy, but not unbearably so, despite the deep ache in her arms. The familiar ache of black tourmaline.

She was here because of why she felt that ache.

There had been deaths.

Betrayals.

Now she finally understood why...and it was all her fault.

And if she didn't do this, more would suffer.

She held the sword in both hands as her pursuer reached the level. She gazed into their leader's deep set icy eyes.

Eyes that had promised her so much.

That had lied to her time and time again.

"I have to make things right."

Commented [CS1]: cool

Commented [CS2]: like...she's trying to shatter it? Ram is a horizontal motion rather than a swing or a slam.

Commented [CS3]: This is very vague

Commented [CS4]: Oh, if it isn't a secret then why waste the words earlier?

Commented [CS5]: She was her...because of *why*...she felt that ache

I'm really unsure of what she's trying to say. She'd only come because of the ache?

Commented [CS6]: So, "finally understood why" means something has changed from earlier in the scene and now...and I don't know what it is. Which is frustrating as a reader—she's having a realization but she's not sharing it with me. I don't know the before and I don't know the outcome, so it's very, very hard to care about what she's saying here.

UNLESS you're saying she came to steal the sword because she realized something before the chapter started? In which case, I think we have classic trying to propel a reader forward with mystery rather than with story issues here. Knowing what is going on is going to be much more compelling and interesting than empty paragraphs that say "oooh there's SoMEthInG GoINg oN!" because this is a book, of course there's something going on. Tell me what it is so I want to read more 😊

Commented [CS7]: I thought there was more than one! I guess I thought "shouts" meant more than one person, unless the person following her is shouting at *her*.

Commented [CS8]: Oh there is more than one.

He barreled towards her, but she was already gone.

Commented [CS9]: Okay, so super cool concept! This is a interesting, emotionally fraught opening...that is a little bit jerky because a) we don't know any characters involved b)we don't actually know what the characters involved are actually doing.

You can get away with a certain amount of the first, but the second, especially in this kind of a fantasy flash magic cool exit...without details, it just kind of feels like a trope

Chapter 1: The Last Laugh

"I wonder what she's reaching for." Cassy craned her neck for a better view, her light auburn hair drifting across her shoulders.

Emlyn studied the landmark that loomed above them. The Portlandia Statue was eerily similar to the Statue of Liberty, with its impressive size and flowing robes. The copper woman crouched over the entrance to the Portland Building, one hand holding aloft a trident, the other outstretched to those below.

Commented [CS10]: Interesting word choice. Is there something off/eery about the statue?

"Maybe she needs help," Cassy mused.

Emlyn shook her head. The statue's serene expression wasn't one of desperation. "If anything, she's reaching down to help *us*."

"Nah," Cassy said. "She's picking up something she dropped."

Commented [CS11]: haha

"Or she's about to pluck one of us insignificant human beings from the ground."

"Why would she do that?"

"To display her power, show us who's boss," Emlyn explained. "It's only logical."

Cassy laughed and slung her arm around Emlyn's shoulders. "You have a strange idea of what logic is."

Emlyn laughed too, following Cassy and leaving the statue's secrets behind. Still, she couldn't help but look back at it over her shoulder and wonder what the message was. Maybe that help was always there, or that people simply had to accept the help of those that were willing to give it. Or maybe that, like the statue—so high up—help was unattainable.

“Oh, ice cream!” Cassy cried, pointing to their Ben and Jerry’s. She patted her pockets dramatically. “But alas, I have no money with me.” She batted her eyelashes at Emlyn.

Commented [CS12]: ?

Emlyn sighed and pulled a wad of cash out of her jean pocket. “You’re paying next time.”

Cassy pretended to be taken aback. “Of course! I’m as responsible as they come!” She fought to keep a straight face—Emlyn always paid, and they both knew it—but a grin forced its way and the girls giggled, strolling into the shop.

It was the last time in a long time that Emlyn would laugh.

#

Commented [CS13]: ?

They sat at their table—the one with a view of the street. Emlyn liked to watch people walk by and imagine their stories. That woman with the hurried gait and the furrow between her brows was late for work because she’d slept in. She’d stayed up too late watching cheesy reality TV shows with her boyfriend, which was their Friday night tradition. That little boy with the huge smile was pulling at his dad’s fingers because it was finally their father-son day together. His big sister must be out with their mom. And that teenage couple sitting on a bench eating their ice cream made it official yesterday. After years of pining and watching from afar, he asked her out to homecoming, and she said yes.

“You’re storytelling, aren’t you.”

Emlyn dragged her gaze away from the couple. “Busted.”

“I’ve never met someone who daydreamed so much,” Cassy remarked, gesturing with her ice cream cone. “I bet you’re still thinking about that statue too.”

Cassy was right. In the back of Emlyn’s mind, she was still pondering the Portlandia Statue’s interesting position.

Emlyn Fortunado was an unusual girl. She had an extraordinary imagination, one that hadn't faded as she matured but had instead grown. She could always be found daydreaming, or reading, or drawing, or storytelling.

Most people didn't understand that. It annoyed them that Emlyn was never fully present, some part of her forever lost in her fantasies.

But Cassy understood. No matter how often she teased Emlyn for her whimsy, she was always happy to listen to her friend's fanciful ideas.

"Tell me," Cassy said, leaning back in her chair. "What's the story of the Portlandia Statue?"

Emlyn ran her tongue over her braces, savoring the raspberry cheesecake flavored ice cream. She alternated between that and cherry flavor every other Saturday. Cassy got a different flavor every time. She even tried the weird ones, like ketchup ice cream. Ew.

Commented [CS14]: Nice character contrast

"Once upon a time," Emlyn said, "in the age of titans and gods and monsters, there was a goddess named Copper. She was one of the kinder gods, and fond of the little humans that lived their short lives and polluted the earth and scurried around her feet. She watched as they evolved and began mining for precious metals, risking their lives for meager amounts that they would mold into temporary objects. Copper pitied them and wanted to help, but it amused the others gods when mortals struggled for survival, and she was forbidden from assisting them. One night, as the other gods slept, Copper snuck away and presented the mortals with a new metal that was not only pretty, but could be used for..."—Emlyn tried to remember what was made of copper but drew a blank—"building random stuff."

Cassy snickered.

“The mortals named the metal after the kind goddess that gave it to them. The other gods soon made the connection and punished Copper, turning her into the metal that she had betrayed them for. She was to be forever frozen reaching out to help the little humans. The end.”

Cassy gaped at her. Ice cream dripped from her waffle cone and onto the floor, but she didn't seem to notice. “That's terrible!”

Emlyn shrugged. “Sometimes great stories have tragic endings.”

She had no idea how right she was.

#

Emlyn looked up from her book: *Brazen Bladebane and the Gate of Souls*. She loved reading almost as much as she loved coming up with stories, and she prized her books above all else. The *Brazen Bladebane* series was her favorite, and she had read the saga an embarrassing number of times. (This was her seventh reread.)

The phone rang, interrupting her precious reading time. “Mom! Phone!”

“Can you answer it?”

“I have to get to a stopping point!” It was Emlyn's usual excuse, but this time it was true. Brazen Bladebane would have to fight his way past the Gatekeeper to free the soul of his sidekick, Aurora Silversky. It didn't matter that Emlyn knew this scene word for word—the suspense was agonizing.

The phone stopped ringing, and Emlyn knew her mom had picked up.

“Hello?” Emlyn's mom listened for a moment, and something about that wait made Emlyn close her book. Her mom's smile faded and the lines around her eyes deepened as she said, “Wait, slow down. What happened...?” She went silent again, and her composure cracked. Tears filled her eyes, and Emlyn dropped her book, gripping the back of the couch and watching

Commented [CS15]: The first part makes it sound like her mom and the phone are out of sight, the middle part is ambiguous (which isn't a problem) but the last part makes it sound like her mom is in the same room as she is.

her mom. “I—I will.” Emlyn’s mom’s voice broke and she ended the call. She leaned against the counter, tears dripping down her cheeks. Emlyn felt like she was about to throw up. Her mom so rarely cried.

She forced herself to ask. “Who was it?”

Her mom looked at her, anguished. “Ms. Judy.” Emlyn babysat for Ms. Judy’s daughter Charlie sometimes. Ms. Judy lived a few doors down from Cassy.

“There was a fire,” her mom sobbed. She took a deep breath and wrapped Emlyn in a hug. She didn’t say anything for a long time.

“Cassy didn’t make it out.”

#

“Miss Fortunado?”

Emlyn dragged her gaze away from the clock. Her fingers tapped the desk in an uneven rhythm; beneath the desk her legs bounced frantically. Emlyn’s cheeks caught fire under the glares of her classmates and her English teacher, Dr. Whitmore.

“What literary device is used in this excerpt?” said Dr. Whitmore, waiting for her to admit that she had no idea what he was talking about. His eyes were on her restless fingers.

Emlyn put her palm flat on the desk. “Um...metaphor?” It seemed like a safe guess.

Dr. Whitmore wasn’t a big man, just tall and a bit lanky, with curly black hair and dark gray eyes behind metal rimmed glasses. Emlyn thought it was ridiculous that he insisted on being addressed as “Dr.” simply because he had a PhD in rhetoric. Dr. Whitmore always had an eyebrow raised, for some reason or another, and he took every opportunity he had to sigh loudly.

He sighed loudly. “That is...correct, actually.”

Emlyn bit back a smile. The answer was *always* metaphor.

Commented [CS16]: Sad!

I think there’s an intellectual jump here, though—there’s a fire...but it’s not at Cassie’s house...but Cassie is dead.

A few doors down could mean house or apartment or townhouse, so I’m not sure how Ms. Judy is involved. Was the fire at Cassie’s house the whole time, or was it at Ms. Judy’s house too?

Commented [CS17]: This girl is going to have a rough go in college.

But Mr. Whitmore wasn't done with her yet. "Do you have any idea what page we're on?"

Emlyn looked down at the book, *My Brother Sam is Dead*. "Twenty-seven?" Someone giggled behind her.

Mr. Whitmore rolled his eyes skyward and sighed again. "We were on page twenty-seven an hour ago. Follow along, please."

Emlyn flipped along in the book until she found the passage the class was discussing. She tried to pay attention, she really did. But not ten seconds later she was watching the clock again.

Someone shot Emlyn a glare, and she realized her fingers were dancing noisily over the desktop again.

She sat on her hands.

Finally, the bell signaled the end of the day, and Emlyn came alive, slinging her backpack over a shoulder and elbowing her way through the crowded halls to her locker. Her excited fingers fumbled with the dial for a moment, but the lock gave soon enough. She grabbed her coat and pushed through the throngs of middle schoolers until she finally burst out of the building.

Emlyn jogged to the other side of the road that ran past the school, a huge smile on her face, and focused on the empty space next to the stop light. After a moment of concentration, her friend materialized, standing next to it.

"Hi, Cassy."

#

There was a time when Cassy was gone, about two months ago. Emlyn remembered a funeral and lots of crying; there wasn't even a body to mourn.

A part of Emlyn died in that dim church.

She sobbed until she choked. The next day, she didn't get out of bed. Her mom even called a doctor to the house. She was ill.

A week of sickness and quiet weeping passed.

Eventually there were no more tears left to cry, and Emlyn was empty. Numb.

She got out of bed; she ate; she drifted through the house as a ghost. Emlyn had become a shell of the girl she once was.

"You can't live this way," her mom had pleaded her.

Emlyn's brown eyes had remained glazed, but her head dipped down in the tiniest nod. Her mom was right.

She couldn't live this way. She couldn't live without Cassy.

The vivid imagination that used to come so easily to Emlyn had all but vanished with Cassy's death. Now, she needed it more than ever.

Emlyn called on her imagination that night. She thought of a world where Cassy was still alive, where everything was fine.

They would be having a sleepover.

She imagined her friend curled up beside her and slept peacefully for the first time in weeks.

Emlyn coped through her **lies**. She insisted to her family that Cassy was alive. She said it so many times that she began to believe it.

A part of her knew that Cassy was dead. But with every day of denial, that part of her eroded. The truth crumbled away in chunks until it was gone, and all that was left was her **conviction**.

Commented [CS18]: ?

Commented [CS19]: interesting

Cassy came to her easily after a time. Emlyn still had to will her to appear, but her belief made it feel natural.

“Emlyn, honey, she’s gone,” said her mom. “You can’t keep denying that.”

Yes, I can.

“Grow up already,” said her older sister, Stacy. “You’re too old to have an imaginary friend.”

Not imaginary, she thought. Invisible.

Invisible to everyone but her.

#

“Emlyn? You didn’t hear anything I just said, did you?” She and Cassy were walking home from school.

Emlyn smiled sheepishly. “Sorry.”

Cassy faltered in her steps, then covered it up with a shaky grin. She hesitated—froze up—a lot lately. “Daydreaming?”

“Just thinking.”

“You’re not going to make me pry, are you?” Cassy nudged Emlyn playfully, but Emlyn didn’t feel it. Since Cassy had returned, she’d been intangible. Emlyn didn’t know why. It worried her, and from the look on Cassy’s face, she didn’t like it either.

“Nah. I was just thinking about us.”

Before Cassy could respond, Logan (who Emlyn had determined was the most annoying boy in the history of the world) popped up beside her. “Who’re you talking to, Em?”

“I’m busy. And don’t call me Em.”

“What’re you busy with?” he pestered. “You on the phone?”

She rolled her eyes. Her phone was obviously in her pocket. “No.”

“Then who are you talking to?”

“Just *go away*,” she snapped, venom in her voice.

His eyes widened a bit. “Huh? I just thought—”

She glared until he shrugged and walked away.

Then she stopped and spun in a full circle, looking for Cassy. This happened too often.

Someone would interrupt their conversation, and Cassy would vanish. So rude.

Emlyn willed her to appear, imagining Cassy standing to her right.

“Cassy?”

“Here,” she said, showing up where Emlyn had intended. She was trembling slightly.

“All good.” She sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

Cassy had been different these past few weeks. Skittish, nervous, unsure of herself. She shied away from other people and insisted she and Emlyn avoid crowded places. She was nothing like her past, extroverted self.

“I hate Logan,” Emlyn muttered.

“Can’t say I’m a fan of being totally ignored,” Cassy agreed, biting her lip.

They continued the way home, talking. Emlyn got weird looks on the way, strangers staring at her with confused expressions on their faces. They stared right through Cassy, didn’t even bother acknowledging her existence.

A few weeks ago, she’d learned that Cassy was invisible to everyone else. But Emlyn saw her, and that was all that mattered.

Commented [CS20]: like...since she died? Or is this a lot later?

There’s some interesting things not lining up here. We’re in a distant third, it seems like, so events not matching up with a character’s perception of events is probably okay? But it seems like right as Emlyn acknowledged that her friend was dead—AFTER mourning her, she decided her friend wasn’t dead after all and there’s no reckoning with that dissonance. It’s not logical (which it doesn’t have to be! But we’re not a part of the mental jumps she’s making in order to believe this herself. Explanations for the church, for the fire, for Cassie’s absence, for why she can disappear and reappear now. She doesn’t address it (which I guess she doesn’t have to) but she also doesn’t ignore it on purpose or give us any indications as to where she is mentally, what she ACTUALLY believes vs what she’s just pretending.

Commented [CS21]: Okay, so...she actually believes it and is like, “ok, you’re invisible now.” I can get on board with that. But does she...remember the funeral? The church, the mourning?

Things we like:

- Racing through a maze of frozen monsters is a great starting point. Frozen monsters do sound pretty cool.
- “It was the last time in a long time that Emalyn would laugh” is great foreboding and recasts the chapter’s title in a way I really like.
- I love the idea of a girl pretending her dead friend back into existence. Very cool concept for a story.
- I like the back and forth about the Portlandia statue.
- The ice cream choices (Emalyn having two she always bought vs Cassie who tried everything including ketchup-flavored) was nice character work.
- Emalyn’s characterization is solid and directly connected to the plot we’ve gotten so far. Girl always in her own head uses it as a coping mechanism when her best friend maybe dies.

Things that might need a second look:

- Sometimes we get information out of order--for instance when Emalyn grabs the artifact and afterwards we find out it’s a sword. Or when She meets her pursuers’ eyes, but we don’t know who these pursuers are yet.
- Because the main character is the same in the prologue and the first chapter, I would love to have a sense of how much later the first chapter happens.
- Though the first two sections of the first chapter have fun character moments and foreboding, because nothing happens in them to further the plot, I’m not sure how essential they are.
- At a point in the story, I was still unsure whether Cassy really was imaginary or not, but Emalyn seemed to already know, so I wondered what information she had that I didn’t/ Same. This is written in distant third, so I’m okay being a little farther back from the narrator, but we see Emalyn register her friend’s death, go to a funeral and mourn. I’m not sure if she’s pretending to herself or if she really believes her friend is still alive (and, if that’s the case, how does she explain the funeral?) or, if she’s pretending, knows she’s pretending, and pushing away reality. It says “she began to believe it.” but I’m not sure what that means in practice. Especially when Cassie APPEARS. Like, how long did that take, and how does she explain the time that Cassy wasn’t there?
- Emalyn mentions that Cassie has been skittish the last few weeks--I’m not sure if she means since she actually died or if there has been a time jump and this is much later, so imaginary Cassie has happy moments and skittish moments, or if imaginary Cassie has always been skittish in contrast to her alive self.
- When her mom gets the call about there being a fire, her mother starts with Ms. Judy, as if Ms. Judy has had a fire. There’s a huge jump from “there was a fire” to “Cassy is dead” with no dots to connect between them other than the fact that Cassy lived near Ms. Judy.
- Super nit-picky--there’s some weird blocking stuff where I’m not sure if Emalyn’s mom is in the same room as she is or not when she answers the phone about Cassy dying in the fire.
- The prologue vs the first chapter: the prologue makes some boy/romantic betrayal/carnage promises that made me think this was YA, but when we get to the first chapter it’s set in a middle school.

- When she grabs the sword it says “she finally understood why” which means something has changed from earlier in the scene and now...and I don't know what it is. Which is frustrating as a reader—she's having a realization but she's not sharing it with me. I don't know the before and I don't know the outcome, so it's very, very hard to care about what she's saying here.

Unless you're saying she came to steal the sword because she realized something before the chapter started? In which case, I think we have classic trying to propel a reader forward with mystery rather than with story issues here. Knowing what is going on is going to be much more compelling and interesting than empty paragraphs that say “ooh there's SoMEthInG GoINg oN!” because this is a book, of course there's something going on. Tell me what it is so I want to read more

- All of the scenes are very cool and evocative on their own, but I'm not sure about the ordering and pacing created with how they're stitched together right now. An example, I had an early note about wanting to know why Evelyn always paid for ice cream, but then later when I found out about Cassey being dead/invisible/imaginary that suddenly became super cool in retrospect. But that moment of ah that was cool came scenes later. And I'm not sure if that scene even is supposed to be after Cassey's supposed death. Anywho, I think focusing on presenting scenes so that we get a flow of what people want, why they're doing what they're currently doing, and why that isn't/might not work will help. My prescriptive advice is to look at rearranging the order of scenes to focus less on delivering a surprise and more on introducing the premise of the book as fast as possible. My super prescriptive advice is to retool the statue/ice cream scene with more subtle lampshades that Cassey isn't really there (more things like how she never pays) and end the section with a one liner confirming everyone else can't see her. Then maybe jump to the finding out about the fire scene