

The Valkyrie

A Scrios Chronicle Short Story

By E J Josephson

At the beginning of her life, Starr Horton was quite timid, a wallflower. Growing up, she was always bigger than her peers, and she wished she could be invisible. She was 28 inches long and weighed 13 pounds at birth. Yeah, it was a C-section.

Her parents, lifelong Harlem residents, were proud, blue-collar workers. Her father, Charles, a local celebrity, was a daytime city bus driver and a nighttime bouncer at a club that hosted one-off events. No one messed with Charles. He stood six feet six inches tall and weighed a trim 268 lbs. At forty-something, Charles's body was a testament to his dedication, still toned and strong. Though he might occasionally have to grab and separate people, his reputation meant no one ever dared to square off with him. Because everyone knew him and his history as a hometown hero, who, save for a broken hand, would have been at the 2004 Athens Olympics for the USA in super-heavyweight boxing.

His pro career was brief but successful, with a record of 13-4 (all 13 wins by KO). Charles retired in his twenties because of a problem with his right wrist that would not heal properly.

Those who feared him were unaware of the morning struggle he endured, trying to warm his hand enough to drive the bus. The wrist brace he wore on the terrible days helped, but didn't totally ease the pain and the feeling of pins and needles in his ring and pinky fingers.

Starr's mother, Simone, also worked multiple jobs. As an RN, she worked at a local hospital. In the evenings she worked for much less than she did during the day, helping a government-funded non-profit that provided elderly care in her community.

Beyond their hard work, they were also fortunate. They had a rent-controlled apartment in a good small community. All the extra money earned went to pay the part of the tuition that was not covered by Starr's scholarship to the R. Lee Thorpe School on 85th Street.

 Starr's time at the school was... eventful. Since kindergarten, the older children harassed her. Because of her size, they assumed she was older than she was. Because she was black and a scholarship recipient from Harlem, they assumed she was dumb.

The years from kindergarten to fifth grade were tough. She would often return from school with a note, her knees and palms marked with scratches from a shove that sent her sprawling. It had become a status game at the school that they called "Falling Starr".

When Charles formed a human eclipse at the front door of the school, the school's security tried to turn him away. He presented his parental ID, and someone escorted him to the office. Charles sat down with several members of the administration at an impromptu meeting and showed pictures of his daughter's hands, knees, face and damaged clothing. He provided the names his daughters gave him and could see in their faces that they already knew the truth.

The school's response was, literally, to form a circle and talk about it. The name of the joke response was a "Restorative Circle". Most of the boys on the list of attackers were present with their parents. Some parents even brought a lawyer, who advised the boys to remain silent. Hell, no one was going to say a thing, anyway. After two questions and two passes around the circle, it was over and the boys left, smirking at each other as they walked.

"Is that it?" Charles asked as the meeting broke apart, his voice climbing the register. "Seriously, that's it?"

"Give it a chance, Mr. Horton," the guidance counselor urged.

“Sure, you don’t have to go home with a daughter who is being systematically bullied and beaten up. Have you seen the videos on Snapchat? I mean. Students are sharing these videos throughout the school. Now I’ll go home and try to explain to her how everyone getting in a goddamn circle and refusing to say anything or apologize for assaulting her, makes her safe. When she wakes up screaming at night. Maybe we will form a triangle with her mother, and she will forget that the school doesn’t give a shit.”

hat night, Charles started teaching his daughter the sweet science. He was certain she would have no interest, but he would try. Try to help her protect herself. Even if it was just helping her with her balance. “How the hell did I get here?” he thought. “Having to teach my sweet baby to defend herself, because these people won’t protect her.”

She took to his teachings like the natural she was. She reminded him of himself. Some things she did that first night, the skills she seemed to just know... it was like she was just waiting for his permission to show him what she already knew. Like he was giving a lioness permission to be a lioness.

Charles thought the first five years before fifth grade were going to be the bad times, but in fifth grade he had released a warrior. She was going to twist the playing field back to level, even if that meant tearing it from its moorings. He tried to tell her fighting was a last resort, like his daddy had told him. She had a look in her eyes that worried him. That was the same look as the boy he saw in the mirror 25 years ago. He made her swear she would only defend herself, and that was a concession she agreed to.

In weeks she went from a clumsy, oversized girl to an athlete with balance. The problem was that now her size and weight were bait to the predators in her school, who still only saw an awkward girl. He could feel her raw power through the training targets he held, and her quickness and anticipation were off the charts. Charles wondered what the first human thought when he saw a clumsy-

looking bear. Did he think, “Awe, look at that little fella... so cute. I am going to call you bear, because you are so cute and cuddly looking,” before it ate him.

TIt was a little more than a month before the first call came from the school. The secretary was calling because, “There has been an incident.” He would hear that several more times over the ensuing weeks, but the first time he went to the school, Starr was sitting in the office when he arrived. She had been crying.

The guidance counselor and the principal were present in the small office they used for the meeting. The guidance counselor spoke first. “Mr. Horton, we are here today to discuss the conduct of your daughter... Apparently, she beat up and choked a boy until he was unconscious.”

“He attacked me!” Starr protested.

“We have talked about this,” the guidance counselor said. “There were several witnesses who said you walked up and attacked William.”

“He pushed me from behind and tried to make me fall down the stairs... again!”

“Wait, this school has cameras everywhere and metal detectors... you telling me none of this was caught on the cameras?” Charles said with a twisted face. “What I am saying is, we were here just a few weeks ago, complaining about the exact thing she is saying now.”

The principal turned to the guidance counselor. “Has security reviewed the footage from the cameras?”

“I don’t think so, but there were over five children all saying Starr jumped William.” The counselor replied. “... but that is on the to-do list, and we have not heard from security yet on this.”

“Listen, if my daughter is going out and attacking kids like some kind of thug, I guarantee you, I will deal with it! However, can we at least see if the cameras tell a different story here?”

Charles could feel the light smile coming from Starr without even looking in that direction. He leaned his head in towards his daughter and said in a low grumbling tone, “Listen here, little lady, even if the film shows EXACTLY what you say happened, happened. If what they said is true... I have a chore list for you that you will still be trying to finish when you have your own kids... feel me?”

“Yes, Daddy,” she said, with all signs of that smirk banished from her face.

The camera angles were poor; worse yet was the CCTV video quality, but there, obvious for anyone to see, was a boy pushing a blob that was shaped like Starr towards the stairs, while other kids raised their hands and cheered. Making out faces was impossible because the quality of the video was so poor. The violence that ensued, however, Charles knew beyond a doubt it was his little girl. Even with the poor imagery, the blob that was Starr moved with catlike quickness and balance. The crowd of blobs around the action seemed to stop and just stare, and Starr dismantled the blob that had pushed her. He could see in the pixilated picture a three-punch combo she had learned just recently. Starr was all over him. The two blobs merged for twenty seconds. When the Starr blobbed stepped back, the other blob slumped to the cement floor.

Charles thought to himself in the short silent period, “Oh Starr, are we going to talk when we get home.” He was so deep in thoughts he missed half of what the principal said, but he woke up when he heard the word suspended.

“Wait, what?” Charles asked a little louder than he meant to. “What do you mean, suspended?”

“Sir, it is protocol in this type of incident,” the principal responded.

“What do you mean? I don’t recall any of the boys who have been beating on her for years ever being suspended or really corrected in any meaningful way. Why didn’t my daughter get a healing ring or whatever you called it a couple of weeks ago? She is an excellent student. She works hard and gets A’s! How does this punishment reflect in any way your efforts to protect her, up to this point?”

“Sir, restorative circles are suitable for situations with no actual injuries,” the principal said.

“No actual injuries? Babydoll, show this man your hands,” Charles said as he turned to his daughter. “Show him your knees. Show him the scars... Show him your fucking... sorry... show him your front tooth you chipped when you hit the bottom of the stairs.”

“Sir, those incidents were all deemed accidents,” the principal said with exasperation creeping into his voice.

In front of them, muscles rippled under the shirt and jacket as a monster stood up in the room. Charles seemed taller and larger than when he had entered the room. He loomed over the table, controlling the urge to react as he would have 25 years before. “Fine,” came the words from his mouth. “What are we talking... as far as suspension?”

“Policy suggests three days, and that is what it is supposed to be, but I think one day should be enough to get the picture across that we do not accept or condone this type of behavior,” the guidance counselor suggested as the wide-eyed principal nodded.

The lunacy of the argument made Charles chuckle as he said, “Don’t condone... Okay, grab your bag, baby-girl, we will talk about this on the way home. Sir, I have to say, I do not agree with the way you’re handling this, and I think in your manner you’re emboldening the actual instigators to keep up their actions. I know my daughter is a scholarship admittee, and I am thankful for the education she is receiving in the classroom. It’s unfortunate that the education she is receiving in the hallways is so reminiscent of the world I grew up in.”

“I assure you, sir, there is no racism at play here... None!” the principal said in a hurt tone.

Charles looked at the man, tilted his head slightly and lowered his nose in an “are you serious” look. “You are entitled... to think that way, sir,” he said and turned, ushering his daughter in front of him to the door, and left.



hen they got home, they waited for Starr's mother to come home, for their usual handoff, before Charles went to work at the club. Charles made dinner while they waited, browning hamburger from the refrigerator and adding two cans of beans and about a half cup of ketchup. Starr always loved to eat "Daddy's Special Recipe", but she avoided letting the excitement show. Their discussion had been serious on the way home.

"Baby girl, you coulda killed that boy," her father said. "Choking someone out is so damn dangerous. If you had broken anything or held it too long, we would be at the police station right now. You woulda been on the news. Hell, right now, they could lay this kind of action on me and your ma, and take you away until we proved you had a suitable home."

He was quiet until he noticed she was sobbing. He stopped, got down on one knee and hugged his daughter. "I love you, baby, but you have to take a better path... if you can find one. You were there; you saw how the world is tilted for those rich kids. You can win a fight and lose everything else. That's all I'm saying."

"Run if you can. If you can't, defend yourself and try to create a situation where you can get away."

Starr had listened to the principal's words, and the meaning of her father's words resonated within her as well. Her parents were terrified that the school would expel her, but they desperately wished for the abuse to end.

Starr heard their hushed voices as they discussed it quietly, their words barely audible through the wall. With a deep breath, Starr steeled herself to fix everything.

Starr obeyed her parents, yet the world's harsh realities relentlessly bore down on her. At school, she was always alert and ready. She used her newfound balance to stay on her feet when someone pushed her. At all times, she kept her attention on edge, using the fighter stare her father taught her, to stop things before they started.

Starr was smart. She knew that any fight on campus, even if she technically won, would be a loss. After school, however, she opted to take the longer walk, heading down to the 82nd Street stop for the M101 instead of the nearer one. That was the direction her bullies went.

After three days, the eighth and ninth-grade boys, with a mix of bravado and cruelty, teased the younger fifth-grade girl. Teasing was fine; she gave better than she got. Following her response, which highlighted the irony of his mother owning a particular anatomical feature and his personification of that same feature, a boy attempted to push her. However, in her description, she used a word that begins with "C" which caused his face to flush.

God, Mikey was clumsy. She sidestepped, letting him stumble past her and fall to the ground after he tried to shove her. As he stood up, she could see the unmistakable signs of mounting anger and the flush of embarrassment reflected in his eyes. With a grunt, he took off the heavy backpack and handed it to his friend Tommy. Tommy, though a cheerleader and agitator, never physically touched her. Her daddy would have called him a "shit-stirrer" because he would egg him on. "No, Daddy, Tommy is a pussy," she thought with a smile.

"Alright, you fat bitch, I was just going to push you and watch you cry like always, but now I am going to kick your fat ass," Mikey said.

"Okay, Mikey, you might just do that, but I hope you packed a lunch, asshole, because this will not be as easy as you think it will," Starr said as they circled each-other. "I promise you; you will remember this day for the rest of your life. See, I can't lose. You beat me; you are beating up a girl. But if I beat you... and have no doubts here, Mikey, I am getting ready to beat that ass like I am making scrambled eggs... When I am done, all these people are all going to see you crying for your mommy."

A growl escaped Mikey's lips as he came in to throw a haymaker, his arm reaching back as though he was grabbing an item off a shelf behind him. Before Mikey could bring his George McFly swing forward, Starr's fist hit him square in the nose as she threw a straight right. It was as if someone had pressed pause, and the

world had stopped for him. She could have stopped right there and gone no further. She felt the sickening crunch of cartilage in his nose as she struck him. To prevent any chance of the haymaker from Mikey landing on her, she instantly crouched low and pressed herself tightly against his body. As her father showed her, she kept her knees bent. Starr, recalling her daddy's teachings, delivered a forceful blow to his stomach, right beneath his ribs, repeating the motion with each hand. Driving upwards with her legs, she connected her right fist with Mikey's jaw, a blow so forceful it momentarily lifted him off his feet. Starr watched the world slow down as a broken tooth twirled in the air in front of her face. Behind the tooth, Mikey hit the floor with a sickening thud, reminding everyone of a bag of trash tumbling down a garbage chute.

With Mikey on the ground, she spun towards his friend group. It must have been the look in her eyes. Tommy dropped Mikey's backpack and showed her empty hands as he turned on his heel and jogged away. The other boys, seeing the wreckage she made of Mikey, followed Tommy.

When she looked down, Mikey was rolling on the ground and beginning to whimper. "Good, you're alive!" she said and walked away. She remembered a lesson from her daddy.

Her dad said he always helped the other fighter up when the fight was over, "because," her daddy's voice said in her head, "that drove home the lesson to the other fighter that it was over for both of them."

Starr walked back over to Mikey, who whimpered, "You broke my frickin' tooth!"

"Yeah, yeah, Mikey, let me help you up. I warned you, and next time... if there is a next time, I promise you it will be worse. Tell your friends that too." Starr took off her backpack and reached into an outer pocket to retrieve a couple of tissues. "Here," she said. "This is for your nose." Reaching for the ground, she gently picked up his tooth, careful to hold it with the other tissue, and handed it to him. "I promised something to help you remember today, and here it is," she said. "Now, Mikey, for me this fight is over... unless you decide it isn't. Think about it

some and decide if you agree.” She gave a short wave and walked towards the bus stop for the M101.



ven though the fight was off campus, Starr was a little frightened the fight would get her in trouble with the school, so she made sure her parents knew about it. The beginning of that conversation at dinner was awkward.

It actually started before Starr was completely ready to talk about it. Her mother noticed a deep scratch across her right ring finger’s knuckle. The edges of the cut were red and inflamed, and it was still seeping blood. “How did you hurt your hand, honey-bun?” her mom asked.

“Oh, um... I, uh...” she stammered

Her father took her hand, opened it flat in his, and inspected the injury. He looked into her eyes. “Where did you get this? You were fighting again?” he asked. A few seconds of silence passed as Starr looked down at the table. “Baby-girl, they are going to kick you out of that school. They are just looking for a good reason.”

“No, this wasn’t at school,” she said. “It was a couple of boys... the ones that play the Falling Starr game. They followed me when I was walking to the bus and started picking on me. I tried to just keep walking, and they said some insults, so I said some back. That’s when Mikey tried to push me. I sidestepped it, and he fell down when he missed me. He got back up and was really mad. Mikey started coming back at me again. This time he had his hand back in a fist. He was getting ready to punch me. So, I hit his off switch... just like you said,” as she pointed at her nose. “It stopped him for a second, but he wasn’t done, so I handled business before one of his friends could jump in. I hit him only three more times. Twice in the belly and once in the mouth. All the other boys ran away. I helped him up... like you used to, and I told him, for me, this was over.”

“So, you didn’t kill him?” Charles said with a sincere stare. “Thank God!”

“No, Daddy, but I broke his tooth off. Probably where this came from...” Starr pointed at the wound on her hand with her chin.

“Girl?” her daddy said. “Did you clean it? People’s mouths are dirtier than a trash can,” he said as he led her to the small bathroom by the bleeding hand. He cleaned the wound with soap and warm water and treated it with povidone iodine. Once satisfied, he put on a Band-Aid and taped the wound.

When they got back to the table, she finished the story and received a week of sweeping and cleaning duties on top of her normal daily chores.

Charles and Simone talked until late, discussing the school’s potential actions. How they would deal with it. What they needed to say. How they were going to get their daughter under control. Starr listened as they spoke and noticed their worry, but smiled at the mention of control. She felt in control for the first time. It was a feeling that had been absent from her life until that moment.

hree weeks had passed, punctuated by two more lost teeth and two more altercations that were identical, before the school called. All the fights were with different people. Different bully friend groups watched and learned the new order of things emerge. The fifth grader, five feet eight inches tall and 200 pounds, was not to be messed with. She needed no protection, and no one else needed to be taught that fact.

The principal and guidance counselor were present in the room with Charles and Starr at the requested meeting at the school. Simone was at the door knocking just before they started their conversation. She sat down in a chair between Starr and her husband.

The principal described three incidents that had happened in recent weeks, and Charles acted as if this was the first time he had heard of these events. Simone was quiet and stared at the different people as they spoke.

With the issue laid out before them, Charles turned to the principal, his voice soft, and asked, “May we please see the video of the incidents?”

“Oh,” he said. “These all took place after school and off campus.”

"Hmm," Charles said. "Maybe this is a police matter. How old were the boys that Starr supposedly fought with? Were they like second graders... third? Starr is a fifth-grader, you know."

"Oh," said the principal, "these boys were all in 8th through 10th grade."

"These boys all admitted to laying hands on my little girl? Should we be pressing charges?" Charles asked with a look of surprise and concern.

"Sir, they are all saying that she was the aggressor," the principal said with his voice seeming to weaken.

"So, these young men... let's be plain, by what you are describing... these boys, if I press charges, could be tried as adults. These young men say that they all got beat up by a ten-year-old, fifth-grade girl... off campus? I think I have a suggestion for how we can fix this," Charles said.

"How's that?" The principal asked nervously.

"Why don't you call all the boys and their parents in to the school so we can all have a meeting about this? We will get them all in a big circle and we will ask them all, my daughter included, some questions. After that, we can go around again and ask how it made them feel. Just like the other parents, though... this time I am bringing my lawyer to this meeting as well. We can do that whole restorative process, because it sounds to me like horseplay and accidents, and you told me that's how you fix problems like this, right?"

In a mockery of the process, all the parents and the children met two nights later. No one answered questions, and it was over in ten minutes. As Charles, Samone and Starr left, they could hear parents as they asked the principal, "Is that it? Is she just going to walk out of here now?" Hearing that discussion fading behind them as they walked down the hall brought a smile to Charles' face.



hen months went by without a further incident, the members of the faculty leadership patted themselves on the back for fixing this issue, and the principal wrote a paper on the benefits of restorative justice.

Three years later, in eighth grade, Starr had developed a figure. She had outgrown her earlier body type, and the boys were noticing her. Starr's father was not a fan of her looking like a woman. The fat had disappeared, and in its place was firm muscle. She had grown taller, nearing the height of six feet. Her waist had thinned. Her weight was now 134 pounds, and she was lean.

Starr was in love with the raw exertion of hitting the heavy bag at the gym. Initially, she went to the gym only with her father, when he went. Later, he'd arrive to discover she'd been there an hour, exercising with the punching bag and weights. She was a machine. People watched, their eyes glued to her as she hit the bag with a satisfying thud. It sounded as though someone had hit it with a bat.

At the beginning of the school year, a young boy caught Starr's attention as he walked through the noisy school hallways. He was different. His face always held a beautiful, radiant smile. She was certain he had special needs, based on the way he interacted with the world.

One day, a couple of weeks later, she walked onto the playground behind the school and saw the boy, Gordon, on the ground with a bigger kid punching him repeatedly. Smiling, the child endured the beating from the bully as the surrounding kids cheered. An icy shiver ran through Starr as she strode forward, her mind reliving the grief of her own adolescent trauma.

A sudden hush fell over the scene as they saw Starr coming, and everyone seemed to pause. She stepped forward, grasped the bully's belt, and, with surprising ease, hoisted him away from the smiling, battered boy. She set the bully down gently to the side. Starr helped the smiling boy to a standing position and put her arm around him. As she cleared her throat, readying to speak, Gordon left her protective arm and approached the boy who had been hitting him. He walked up to the thug who had just been pounding on him and hugged him like he would a brother. Afterward, he came back to Starr and hugged her. Starr spoke to the

entire group. "No one touches him. Ever! Got it? Ever!" and all the children present nodded. "Tell your friends that I said never to hurt this child or they will answer to me!"

She took Gordon's hand and led him to class.

No one ever harassed Gordon again.

 tarr saw many things throughout her years watching Gordon. Miracles, as she would call them. She would grow to think that Gordon was an actual angel... like, wings and all. He spread pure love in a world that had such badness in it. But she didn't think Gordon ever saw the bad in the world, or if he did, he didn't engage it or allow it to affect him. It wasn't just his resilience, though.

It was by chance that she learned Gordon could perform actual miracles one day. The only way to explain it was through those words, actual miracles.

Leaving the bus at a stop that was a little further from school than her normal location, she smiled, thinking she could get some extra steps in. She saw Gordon coming out of a three-story brownstone with his mom. Starr followed them as they walked to school. After watching his mother check his backpack and lunchbox, she saw Gordon kiss his mom.

She was certain, remembering how Gordon's hand, not holding the lunchbox, was empty as he climbed the stairs. As he entered the school, she watched, bewildered, as a vibrant potted plant materialized in his hand. Slack-jawed, she followed him as he walked up the stairs and to the right and into the administration area. She watched through the window as he walked up to the receptionist and gave her the plant. The receptionist, Miss Brackwater, teared up and gave Gordon a long hug.

Starr walked over to a bench near the trophy case and sat down heavily. She evaluated what she thought she saw and tried to think out how he could have pulled off such a sleight of hand. Years ago, she had figured out the whole Three-

Card-Monty trick in her neighborhood, so she knew sleight-of-hand tricks. But this kid was not the scheming type. All he did was smile. Hell, he even smiled that day as the bully punched him in his face. The first bell woke her from her thoughts, and she hustled to homeroom.

The next day, she got to school early to watch him enter. She sat on the stairs inside the school. She saw him coming. In his right hand he had his lunchbox, and his left was empty... until he entered the school. Suddenly, grasped in his left hand was a beautiful bouquet of gorgeous flowers. It was the petals of the flowers that caught her attention. Each one looked as though someone had painted it there, rather than it had grown that way.

As Gordon passed, she followed him. He walked down the hall and over to the art room. It surprised Starr when she reached the doorway and saw Mrs. Barnhart standing there. Her husband had died a few weeks ago, and she was planning to be away, potentially for the entire year. With a fresh bouquet in her hand, she was ugly-crying into Gordon's shoulder. Starr retreated and went towards her homeroom, her mind racing as she devised a plan.

The following day, she sat on the cold stone stairs again. Between her knees, she had a small video camera, which she got from her dad's closet. As Gordon entered, Starr watched the door close, and she saw a radiant plant appear in his hand. After Gordon walked by, she retreated to a bench and watched the video three times. She even slowed it down frame by frame and watched how Gordon's hand faced up as he entered the door, and between frames, a plant appeared. In one frame there was an empty hand; in the following frame there was a plant.

For two more days after that, she continued to record him with the same results. She realized that the magical experience was unlike anything she'd known to be possible. She wanted to tell someone, but who could she tell? Who would believe her? Her parents would, but what would they do afterwards? She took the tape out of the camera and placed it back in its box. Starr hid the tape in her room, in a small hole in the wall behind her bookcase. Occasionally, she would pull it out just to watch it in amazement.

She watched Gordon perform his trick all year, and that no one else ever seemed to see it was unbelievable.

he following year was a winter of bitter cold, with the wind howling through the city. Below-freezing temperatures persisted for weeks, making the landscape a frozen wasteland. Tension filled the air, even in the friendly neighborhoods, because of the city's problems. New York City was on the brink of chaos because of fuel-oil shortages and power outages. The piled-up snow on the streets made it difficult for delivery trucks to pass. Out of the blue, a miracle happened.

Out of the snowbanks, flowers grew. It didn't matter that it was way below freezing. Eccentrically colored flowers grew in defiance of the cold. The city seemed to pause in awe of this event. The people of New York were suddenly nice to each-other for a short while. Strangely enough, the flowers announced an early spring as the weather the next day turned warm.

The TV news interviewed people who had never seen flowers like these... but Starr had. They resembled the flowers Gordon used to give at school. She'd never seen one quite like the ones growing in the snow, but they were similar enough to make her suspect Gordon was involved.

The colorful pattern became murals on walls that summer, and picture postcards of the flowers were on every souvenir stand. People made up slogans, "Tough as the flowers in New York City," and "Other cities hope for Spring, New York City flowers fucking demand it!" The bestselling t-shirt, however, showed a big red apple half covered in snow with flowers all around it and the slogan, "I got your Spring right here!"

tarr gained two inches over the summer before her sophomore year, reaching six feet two inches. She resembled a Broadway dancer because of her lean, strong build. However, she would exhale and laugh when people said "dance"; she only danced in the boxing ring. She was 16 years old and could pass for 23.

In the years since fifth grade and the ending of the harassment of the “Falling Starr” game, her academics had exploded. Math came naturally to her, and so did writing. She sought extra classes, and all of her normal school year classes were AP. It wasn’t long before her size and physical nature became less of an intimidation as compared to her academics. The only school “sport” she took part in was Quiz Bowl, and her team won the City Championship.

Being a senior, while others her age were sophomores, was tough, but it wasn’t the only hardship that weighed heavily on her. The boy she had saved, Gordon, who had opened her eyes to the world’s wonders, had missed a lot of school. People said that he was suffering from a severe illness. After confirming he was in the hospital, she made a large card for him. Starr brought the card around to each teacher so they could sign it. Teachers wrote notes for him, and the ink seemed to bleed their affection as they described how he had touched their lives. The notes all wished him well, with each teacher saying so in their own unique way.



hen Starr first arrived at the hospital, Gordon’s mother came down to the waiting area. Starr could see the change in her. The stress was aging her, and she looked exhausted. “Hello?” Gordon’s mother said.

“Hi, um, I am Starr, um. I am friends with your son,” Starr said.

“Yes! I remember seeing you on the way to school several times, and how Gordon always wanted to hug you,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, well, honestly, you know, he likes to hug everyone,” Starr said with a sweet, awkward laugh. “I, um, brought this card. Well, actually, a lot of letters too from the teachers. Everyone at the school loves your son, and we miss him there.”

“Oh, that’s sweet,” she said. “I will make sure he gets these, and I will sit and read them with him.”

“If it’s okay, can I see him?” Starr asked.

"Uh, he is really sick. I am not sure..." she paused, noticing the genuine disappointment and the beginning of a tear in her eye. "Let me check with the doctor. I'll be right back."

Gordon's mother disappeared into the back of the hospital. A few minutes later, she stepped around the edge of the corner and waved her forward. Starr stood and followed. When she stood, Persie, Gordon's mother, saw Starr's height. "Wow, you are tall... and so beautiful."

Starr's face flushed with warmth as she thanked her. Following Persie, she walked about a hundred feet before stopping near a doorway. "Okay, he has lost some weight, but he just woke up, so this should be a good time." Persie entered the room, and said, "Gordon, you have a guest."

When Gordon saw her, his eyes lit up with excitement. A rare word, frankly the first word Starr had ever heard from him that crossed his lips. "STARRRR!"

She walked over to his bed as excited as he was and grabbed his hand, but she knew that was not enough as he pulled her in for a hug. The hug lasted for almost ten seconds. She sat down and talked to him. "Hey there, my big guy. We sure miss you at school!" She paused, and continued, "You need to get better soon, okay?"

Gordon just smiled at her.

"Would you like to sit and watch TV with him for a little while?" Persie asked as her husband, Cas, smiled from the corner. "This is the most excited I have seen him in weeks," Persie confessed.

Starr pressed a little. "The teachers miss the special plants and bouquets you send with him. They are so beautiful and unique. Are you a horticulturist?"

"We are!" Persie said and cut her eyes towards Cas. "We have an orangery on the top floor of our house near my art studio." She quickly changed the subject. "What year are you in school, dear?"

Starr knew from their reactions that they knew about Gordon's miracles, and why shouldn't they? He was their kid. "I should be a sophomore this year," Starr said.

“But I am graduating at the end of the year. School really clicked with me in recent years, and I love learning. This summer, I will start school about twenty blocks north of our current school, at Columbia. They have already admitted me with a full scholarship. I plan to study genetics and physiology, although quantum physics fascinates me.”

Persie looked at her dumbstruck for a moment. “Oh my. That... That’s amazing. Your parents must be so proud.”

Starr smiled. “My dad just gets blurry-eyed when I say quantum physics, and nods. I figure I will take classes and use my electives to see which one speaks to me the most.”

Starr sat with Gordon for over an hour, holding his hand in hers. When he appeared tired, she stood and hugged him again. She kissed him on the top of his head, and Persie almost teared up. “Is it okay if I come by some and visit?” She asked as Gordon, despite his exhaustion, seemed to shake with excitement.

“That would be great!” both of his parents said in unison.

They exchanged numbers and set up a protocol to call or text before visits to coordinate, but basically, she was welcome anytime. They stressed with her though, “This is your senior year, and this could be a long-term thing here. You are welcome, but be sure to enjoy this time too with your family and friends.”

In that light, Starr came when she could, but much as Gordon’s parents predicted, her life limited the availability, in ways she would feel terrible about later. After that, she focused on the times she could be there, hear him say her name when she arrived, and see his wonderful smile.

hree weeks after Gordon’s funeral. Starr called Persie and asked if she could come over for a few minutes. Persie said, “Sure. Starr, Gordon treated you like you were his sister. We would love to see you.”

When she arrived, they sat in the living room. Cas offered, “Would you like anything to drink?”

“Oh no, I am fine. Thank you.” She seemed to pause for a moment. “I wanted to thank you for letting me be a part of Gordon’s life,” she said as a tear ran down her cheek.

“Oh, honey!” Persie said as she shot to her side and leaned in to hug her.

“No. You don’t know the entire story,” Starr said. “... and I will only talk about it here. Gordon. Gordon saved me. When he was in kindergarten, I had seen him walking into the school. My first year at that school was really hard. I was a lot bigger than all the other kids in my class. The older kids were terrible and mean to me. They used to push me down in a game they called Falling Starr. That went on for years. One day, I knocked a bully’s tooth out... ok maybe more than one bully... like three different bullies in three weeks. After that, they left me alone. Frankly, they were terrified of me. I was a pariah at the school. No one talked to me. I felt like Shrek... like an ogre. One day I walked onto the playground at the school and I saw a ring of kids. When kids stand in a circle, there is a fight, and it’s never a fair fight. As I walked up, everyone froze. I picked up the boy who was on top of Gordon, who was punching him in the face. And put him down a lot more gently than I thought he deserved. I helped Gordon up. I told everyone, Gordon is under my protection. You mess with him; you are messing with me! Suddenly, Gordon walked over to the boy who was just hitting him and hugged the boy like they were best friends. The kid didn’t dare stop him from hugging him or I woulda squashed him like the bug he was. After that, Gordon hugged me. I swear, something changed in me that second. I don’t know what it was. But only my momma and daddy ever hugged me. In him, I felt kindness and unconditional love. I vowed to myself at that moment. No one would ever hurt your child again.”

When Starr stopped, Persie said, “Thank you for telling us that. We saw bruises, but the school said that nothing had happened. That he must have fallen down or something.”

“I should stop there, but I am not going to,” Starr said. “Your son was special. I told no one, because logic dictates and every science-fiction movie proves the big corrupt government comes along eventually and things go sideways. I saw in your eyes that first day in the hospital that you knew it too. Hell, he is safe now, and no

one would believe any of us, anyway. But I saw him walk into the school with nothing in his hand... Oh heck." Star reached into her pack and pulled out an old, small camcorder. "I filmed him on three different days as he walked into the school, and you can have the tape when I leave today if you want it. There are no copies. Here, watch as he enters the school, watch his right hand."

They huddled around the small screen. "Holy shit!" Cas and Persie said simultaneously.

"We wondered how it happened and saw it happen only once. Even that time, we didn't see this part." Cas said. "Let me see the connector ports for the camera... yeah, it takes HDMI. Thank God. He went to the cabinet that held the TV and pulled out a long cord. Attached one end to the side of the TV and plugged the other into the camera. Once he connected both ends, he grabbed the remote, turned on the TV, and set the input to HDMI-2. The frozen picture from the paused camera came up on the TV. "Okay," said Cas. "Let's rewind and watch this on the big screen."

They watch the three recorded miracles for an hour. Over and over, they watched. Most of the time they were quiet. They would watch it frame by frame and shake their heads.

Finally, Starr looked at them and asked, "Was he an angel? Or was he some kind of god or something?"

"Honey, all I know is, he was our son, and we loved him from the moment we knew he was in my belly," Persie said.

At the end of the night, after pizza and sodas. Starr rose to leave. "You need to take that camera and the tape with you. It is yours. Like you said, Gordon is safe. You protected him." Cas said. Cas reached for his wallet.

"Oh no. No need." Starr said.

"I'm not trying to pay you!" he said in a razzing voice and laughed. "Someone gave me these, and I did not know why, but I think I do now. These are for you. You can go by yourself or take someone with you," he said as he handed her two tickets.

“They are for a show that is off-Broadway, but we have seen it several times over the years.” He took a quick glance at the tickets. “Oh, thank God it is in English,” he said and laughed. “Trust me, you will like this. It is called Richard Wagner’s Ring Cycle. It is based on an old Norse poem called *Helreið Brynhildar*. Look it up. If you can’t find anyone to go with you, one of us would be glad to, and explain things if they need any explanation. But I think if you read the poem, you will understand. We were both dorky in college and loved Norse mythology.”

he weather in the Scottish Highlands was cold and rainy. Inside the subterranean research center, the management group of Ferguson Archive gathered. “Hello everyone and good-morning! Laoch ‘Gus’ Ferguson said to the twelve people around the large conference room table. On the monitors, several others had joined remotely from different corners of the world. “Today I wanted to introduce you to our latest hire. She comes to us from the United States, New York City, to be exact.”

“Harlem,” the woman said.

“Harlem,” Gus said with a smile. “You may think, wow, she is young. If you stop your evaluation there, you would be an idiot. Starr has an undergraduate degree from Columbia in quantum physics. She also has a doctorate in that from MIT, as well as an odd mix of another doctorate in genetics and human physiology. She is part of a team at MIT that is likely to be recognized in Stockholm, Sweeden in the coming years. This brilliant lady is joining us on Sanura’s team. Her callsign is Valkyrie.”

The End