

A Lost Little Girl

The horns of the hunt echoed across the snow. Twelve-year-old Zaynab Sulzbach ignored them, setting off on her own quest. Her father would give her hell later if he caught her, but she didn't care a whit. Zaynab had her own mission in mind, and it didn't involve spilling the blood of mutated creatures on radioactive ground or showing off her riding prowess for undesired suitors.

Zaynab's boots crunched the gray snow as she strode southward from the northern end of the Valley of Fire towards the Riverrock Lands, an abandoned agricultural community near the northeast end of Lake Mead. She wore a long, moss-green coat and knee-high gray boots to protect her against the elements. Zaynab's cozy rainbow-colored scarf had been crocheted by her mother.

The tag on the boots identified the color as Misty Mountain Hop, and Zaynab thought the name was silly if pretty. Nobody wearing these boots would be hopping around misty mountains,

they'd be hoping not to freeze their ass off, die from radiation sickness, or both. She felt similarly about Silver Mist, the color of her hat and gloves.

The color of Zaynab's backpack was Vegas Gold, which she thought was an appropriate if dumb name. Her destination was the city of New Las Vegas, which modeled itself off the abandoned city of Las Vegas, or, as her mother Katherine jokingly called it, Lost Wages. New Las Vegas was situated approximately thirty miles east of old Las Vegas near Calville Bay.

Old Las Vegas had been destroyed during the Battle of Purification, 75 years before Zaynab was born. The new location didn't help much when the New Eastern Faction led by General Suleyman Schwarz leveled the Nellis Military Complex with a fifteen-megaton warhead during the Assault of Fallen Angels. Zaynab was two years old at the time and had no memory of the attack, but Katherine's memories of the resulting devastation often prompted her to awaken screaming and sobbing. Zaynab learned at an early age that asking her mother to give her a history lesson calmed Katherine's anxiety.

"Mummy wouldn't have minded at all if you had joined us for lessons, Buddy," Zaynab said softly, reaching to gently touch the straps of her backpack. "She would have loved you almost as much as I do, I'm sure. Unlike Father, she was very gentle."

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Zaynab recalled her mother teaching her about the history of the world. Katherine always said that those who did not know their past were doomed to repeat it, as evidenced by all the times that humanity attempted to destroy itself. Conversely, Zaynab's father, Zycus Sulzbach, believed that learning about the past was a waste of time. He felt it was better to build for the future, in which he was sure he would be a renowned leader.

Zaynab thought Zycus brutish and arrogant. She believed that Katherine was the wisest person she knew, and after her mother's death, the bright and sensitive girl claimed Katherine's room as her own. She spent as much time as she could studying her mother's history texts.

Zaynab took in homeless cats and kittens. Sadly, none of these animals lived very long. She was taking her most recent companion, Buddy, to the shrine she'd created for her departed animal friends in the New Las Vegas Library. The parched and irradiated environment in New Las Vegas prompted mummification rather than putrefaction.

Most people avoided New Las Vegas. The radiation levels were too high to remain in the city for prolonged periods of time. The stores had long since been looted, and most people didn't care about the contents of the library.

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Zaynab passed the weathered and twisted outbuildings on Strawberry Mountain Farm. She told Buddy the stories that her mother had told her on their excursions.

"Life wasn't always so difficult here, Buddy," Zaynab said. "Before the Battle of Eternal Night, Mother said that this was a beautiful, thriving place. Strawberry Mountain Nursery attracted visitors from all the allied territories. Real strawberries were abundant. My mother sometimes gave me a chunk of strawberry-flavored candy for a treat, but I have never tasted a real strawberry. I don't suppose that you would enjoy strawberries, being a cat.

"I am dreaming of us living somewhere green and peaceful like Strawberry Mountain Farm used to be. You, me, Patches, and all the other friends. I would call it Little Critters Lands because all little critters would be welcome to live there.

"Where do you think the Little Critters Lands would be based, Buddy? Why, they would be in Flying Pig Meadow, of course, because Father always says that my stupid dreams will come true when pigs fly. Of course, flying pigs would be welcome, need you even ask? They could eat the acorns that fell from the oak trees in Jolly Oak Range and the almonds that fell from the almond trees in the Almond Range.

"Before we arrive at the Shrine of Learning in New Las Vegas, we will cross the Blue River Range and pass through the

Meadowbrooke Lands. I know it is a long and arduous journey, but along the way, we will see the Golden Hill Orchard! I don't know if the trees still bear fruit. If they do, it probably isn't edible, but we can use it to decorate the Shrine.

"I believe we should stay the night at the Blue River Range Inn and get an early start tomorrow. I do not believe that Father would send anyone out in this storm to recover his worthless daughter, but if you disagree, Buddy, you must let me know. I trust your judgment."

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As night fell, Zaynab approached a long-abandoned lodge near the frozen trickle that had once been the mighty Blue River, an offshoot of the White River. Climate change prompted by pollution and nuclear exchange resulted in flooding in some areas and drought in others. The Western United Territory had primarily experienced drought, although the southern portion of California had been flooded by rising ocean waters.

As Zaynab expected, the lodge was abandoned and unlocked. She made her way up the stairs and found a room with an unbroken window. A dead female squirrel lay in a nest of abandoned bedding surrounded by eight mutated kits at various stages of development. Zaynab supposed that one or more of the small squirrels might be dwarves as her mother once told her that

squirrels normally had litters of two to four. A vestigial leg dangled from the larger female's belly.

Zaynab stripped the bed and took the bedding into the hallway to shake the dust out of it as best she could. She remade the bed and opened the backpack. She removed a small box from the backpack and cradled it against her chest.

"I know you were concerned about my having to carry you so far, Buddy, but you weigh nothing," she said gently. "Maybe two or three kilos at most. I knew you'd never get very big, no animal does anymore. I knew you wouldn't be alive for long, but every day I wished we could have one more day together. You made my miserable life bearable."

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"By the way, your cat's dead."

Zaynab recalled hearing those devastating words as she entered the one-time Crimson Dune Hotel, taken over and renamed Sulzbach Sanctuary by her father the wannabe feudal lord. There was a smug smirk on Zycus' face as he delivered the blow. Zaynab was unsure if her father's sadism was personal or if she was merely the recipient of the same kind of cruelty that he bestowed on anyone unfortunate enough to cross his path.

"I'll bury him tomorrow," Zaynab muttered, making her way to the stairs so her father wouldn't see the tears forming in her eyes.

"You'll do no such thing. Throw the little bastard on the waste pile and let the scavengers do their job. You'll join me on tomorrow's hunt. Aziz and Aron are going to be there."

"I'll join you if I must, but I have no interest in Aron Aritz. He has the brains of a goreslug."

"Fortunately, you're not expected to unite with him for his brains. You and he both possess the necessary physical characteristics to create new life. That is the sole goal of your union."

"Then you and Aron may be waiting for a long time, for I have not yet reached sexual maturity, and it is uncertain if I ever will. Even if I had, I have no desire to commit my life to being an incubator to infants who will probably be deformed, and even if they aren't, will have a high likelihood of succumbing to cancer before they reach the age where they can continue the morbid cycle of children giving birth to doomed offspring."

"What you desire is of no consequence. You will dispose of your flea-bitten companion before it starts to stink, and you will accompany me on the hunt. I'd put you and your disrespectful mouth on the waste pile without a second thought if I didn't think you stood a chance of bearing a heir to the Sulzbach dynasty, don't think I wouldn't. A disobedient wretch is of no value to me."

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Zaynab's thoughts returned to the present moment.

"My father and his self-serving desires have no value to me," she declared. "Nor does that goreslug Aron or his toady of a father. You matter much more to me than they do, Buddy. That is why I will do right by you no matter what it costs me."

Zaynab removed her waterproof outer clothing and her denim trousers. She took an empty plastic bag, a clean hand towel, and a bag full of wet wipes into the bathroom. Removing her socks and underwear, she squatted in the dusty tub and urinated into the drain. She cleaned herself and stepped from the tub. She placed a clean hand towel in her panties and put her thermal underwear and socks back on. She placed the soiled wet wipes and a blood-stained hand towel into the plastic bag.

Zaynab returned to the bedroom and placed the plastic bag in the bottom of her backpack. She replaced the box in the backpack and pulled the covers over both herself and the backpack. She drew the backpack close to her body.

"My father might be correct about me being able to bear children, but I won't do it," Zaynab declared. "It's better that humanity should die off. We've already done too much damage."

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Zaynab set out before the break of dawn the next day. She walked with determination, making only brief stops. She could find no viable fruit in the Golden Hill Orchard, so she collected colorful dry leaves. The snow tapered off, making traveling easier.

She reached New Las Vegas just after sunset. It was cool inside the New Las Vegas Library and layer of dust covered everything.

"I don't think anyone has been in this building since I brought Patches here six months ago," Zaynab surmised. "This is our last stop, Buddy. We're all going to be together forever now."

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The shrine that Zaynab had created was situated at the back of the library. Multiple closed boxes with names painted on them were arranged around a camping mat covered by a sleeping bag. Patches, Princess, Frank, Joey, Charlie, Frisky, Zippy, Mittens, Bootsy, Shirley, Angus, Athena, Miss Kitty—all told, there were around a hundred boxes.

Zaynab shook the dust from the sleeping bag. She took up a paint set and adorned Buddy's box with his name and the image of a sunny sky on one side and a starry sky on the other.

"Here lies Buddy," she wrote on one side of the box. "Beloved friend of Zaynab Rayna Katherine Monday Sulzbach. He was my son and my moon and my stars."

Realizing that she had misspelled "sun," Zaynab considered correcting the word with white paint but decided to leave it as it was.

"You were my son, Buddy," she said, her voice quavering. "All my little critters were my sons and daughters."

Zaynab took a piece of cardboard and her paints and created another epitaph.

"Here lies Zaynab Rayna Katherine Monday Sulzbach, aged 12 years. Born 10 October 3211 CE. Died sometime around 1 January 3224 CE. Daughter of Katherine Monday, a history teacher, and the best mother in the world, and Zycus Sulzbach, a soldier who hopes to be king."

Zaynab found a few pieces of printer paper and a box of pencils. She wrote a brief biography which she placed beneath a paperweight.

"Katherine Monday was born 2 March 3179 CE and died 15 October 3219 CE, five days after my seventh birthday, from cancer of her reproductive organs. This may be the same cancer that I have. Many girls do not even reach womanhood these days. I have not felt well for a long time, at least six months.

"Zycus Sulzbach was born 21 February 3169 CE. He is powerful and resilient. I admire my father's strength but not his cruelty. He never showed me any warmth and he always told my mother how much she disappointed him.

"I hope that my father does not achieve his objective of repopulating the Earth. Humanity deserves to perish.

"Death will come for me soon. I do not fear her. I embrace her as a sister. If something of me survives, then I will see my

mother and all my animal friends in Little Critters Lands where the angels will welcome us.

"If anyone should find my companions and me, please respect my wishes for us to remain together. My thanks and best wishes. Mama, I am coming home to you now. All of my love, Zaynab."

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The night wind comforted Zaynab as she dreamed in her cozy sleeping bag, her head resting on a pink pillow bearing the image of a smiling cartoon girl waving to her friends.

When morning came, Zaynab sipped a little water and read stories to her animal friends. She napped on and off throughout the day. As the sun began to set, she read Goodnight Moon to her companions and lay down to sleep.

"Mama used to read this book to me," Zaynab explained quietly to the little critters and the moon shining brightly through the window. "It was one of my favorite stories. Now, good night, my children, and good night, Moon."

The next morning the sun shone through the window of the New Las Vegas Library. A young girl with her wavy black hair spread across a cheerful pink pillow lay surrounded by boxes containing the remains of her beloved animal companions. She did not stir.

The mournful wind howled outside, whipping up radioactive dust in the dry bed of Lake Mead.

Acknowledgments

The story was inspired by the following prompts

<https://mindlovemiserysmenagerie.wordpress.com/2021/12/17/first-line-friday-december-17-2021/>

<https://mindlovemiserysmenagerie.wordpress.com/2021/12/10/what-becomes-of-the-brokenhearted-challenge-197/>

<https://mindlovemiserysmenagerie.wordpress.com/2021/12/08/photo-challenge-394/>

<https://godoggocafe.com/2021/12/26/week-five-brave-reckless-creativity-prompt-challenge-once-upon-a-december/>