

Enki's Puzzle



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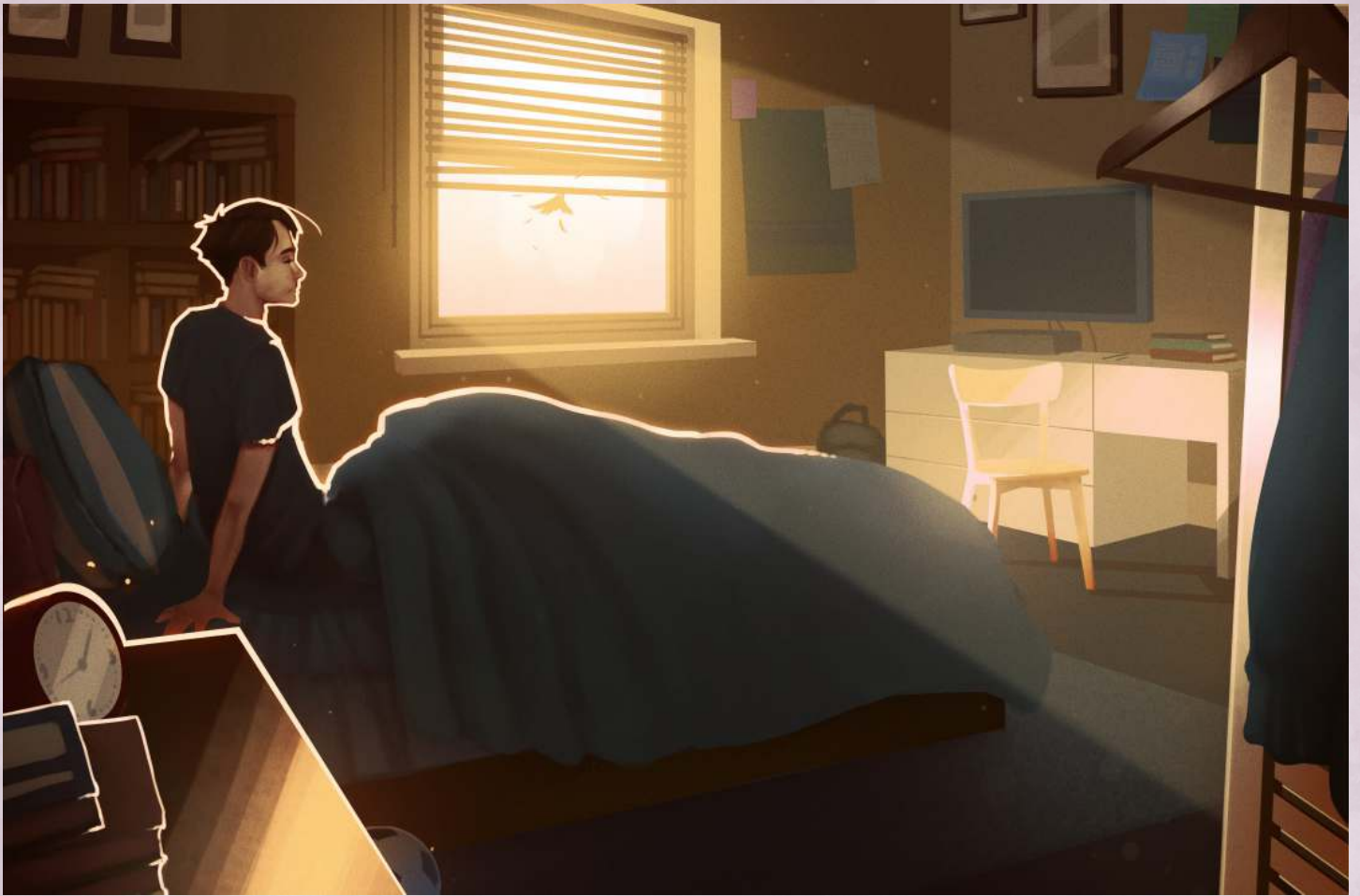
Illustrations by **TenderMindd**

Written by RawlyRawls

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Thump! Nick sat up in bed with a start. Something had hit the window hard. He crawled out of bed and stumbled over to the stream of morning light falling into his room. “What time was it?” He mumbled to himself. He’d slept later than he intended. He didn’t want to miss the game. He looked out on the overhang and saw the poor little bird lying dead. It had been a cute little chickadee. “Sorry, pal.”

He turned, and walked back to his closet, pulled off his PJs, and got on his soccer uniform. He collected his shin guards and cleats to put on at the field and headed downstairs.

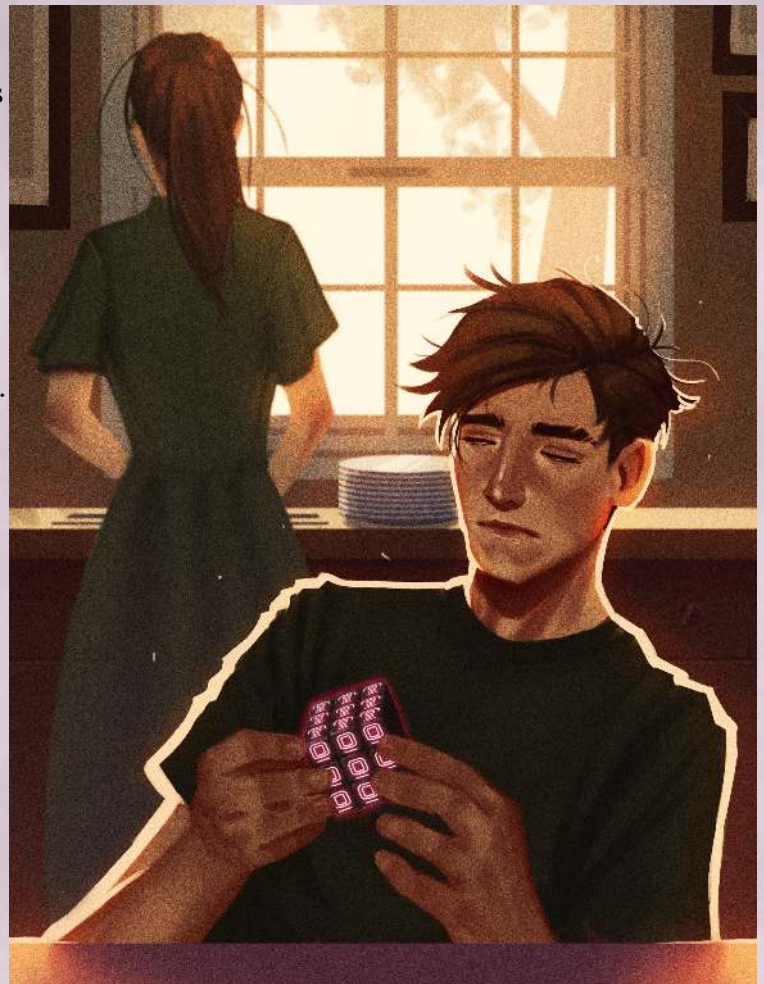
“Morning, Mom.” Nick spotted his mother washing dishes in the kitchen sink.

“Morning, Nicky. I was about to come wake you. Wouldn’t want you to miss the big game.” Kate turned and fixed her eighteen-year-old son with a warm smile. Her brown hair was up in a ponytail, and she looked radiant without any makeup. “There’s a stack of waffles keeping warm in the oven.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Nick ignored her smile and set up his breakfast. He sat down at the kitchen table and noticed a leather bag in the seat next to him. “Is Alyson home?” Nick spotted a dark, metallic cube just inside the bag. He fished it out. There were four markings repeated all over the cube in random order. The markings seemed to glow faintly.

“Your sister is home for the weekend. She’s upstairs in her room.” Kate went back to washing dishes. “She asked for you not to touch her stuff.”

“Sure, sure.” Nick took the cube in both hands. His sister was always fooling around with cool old artifacts. This looked like some sort of cube puzzle.



Each marking seemed to move either vertically or horizontally. “It’s a Rubik’s cube.” He spun the planes of the cube, trying to bring order to the markings.

“What’s that, sweetie?” Kate was now drying dishes, her wide hips shaking under her green dress with the effort.

“Nothing.” Nick concentrated. It was working, he was solving the puzzle. And then, just like that, he got it. They were all lined up. A red light flashed and the cube surged with heat. “Ow.” He dropped it on the table. The glow died from the markings. The thing looked uniformly black.

“You okay?” Kate turned and saw the cube on the table. “You weren’t playing with your sister’s things, were you?”

“I just wanted to see what it does.” Nick poked the thing. It was cool. He picked it up and tried to spin the markings, but nothing moved. “I think it’s broken.” He dropped it back in the bag.

“Well, you should tell your sister you broke her ... um ... box thing.” Kate walked over to her son and ruffled his messy brown hair. When he pushed her hand away, she walked out of the kitchen. “I’ve got yoga in a few minutes. Put your dishes in the sink when you’re done.”

“Sure.” He called after her. Nick forgot about the cube, finished his breakfast, and raced off to the game.

~

That night the family sat around the table for dinner. Kate sat next to her husband, Fred. Alyson on the other side of the table next to Nick.

“Did you happen to touch my Sumerian puzzle?” She nudged at his elbow.

“Why?” Nick caught his mom’s eye and she nodded her head like she expected him to tell the truth. “Yeah,



sorry, was I not supposed to?”

“You know you weren’t.” Alyson sighed. “I think you broke it. None of the planes will move anymore.”

“What’s it supposed to do?” Nick tried not to make eye-contact with her. He never liked when his big sister was angry with him.

“Well, the legend was that the god Enki gave it to a wayward prince to teach him wisdom and to ... well ... mess with him. The teenage prince had helped himself to one of Enki’s sacred waters, while ignoring duties to his family. The puzzle was meant to get him reconnected to what was important.”

“Teenagers are all the same.” Kate laughed. “Did that puzzle make you want to spend any more time with me? Or your dad?”

“Well, obviously, it doesn’t actually do any of that, Mom.” Alyson smiled at her mother. She knew how difficult Nick was, but that would change with time. “I was just trying to decipher the markings. They are quite strange.”

“So, did I really break a super old thing?” Nick was starting to feel a little nervous.

“Nah, this one is a replica. Only about eighty years old. But it’s supposed to be fairly accurate.” Alyson took a sip of water. “Anyway, how was the game?”

“We lost.” Nick sunk into his chair. Dinner couldn’t end soon enough. He was ready to go to bed and be done with the day.

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Thump! Nick sat up in bed with a start. Something had hit the window hard. He put his head back on the pillow. Another bird? He’d overslept again, the sun shone brightly into his room. He didn’t move for a long while, thinking about that Sumerian puzzle. There was a knock on the door.

“Sweetie, time to get up. You don’t want to be late to the game,” Kate said through the door.

“The game was yesterday.” He shouted back at the door. “And we lost.” He didn’t hear her respond. She’d probably already gone back downstairs. After a while, he got up, got dressed, and headed downstairs. His mother was sitting at the kitchen table reading her tablet.

“You really are going to be late.” Kate looked up and smiled at her frowning son. “Eat your waffles and hustle.”

“I’m not going to be late, because we lost the game yesterday. And you made waffles yesterday. And you wore that green dress yesterday, too.” Nick noticed his sister’s leather bag on the chair next to him. He reached in and pulled out the Sumerian cube. It had its glow back, but when he tried to move the puzzle pieces, it didn’t budge.

“That’s your sister’s, and she asked me specifically to tell you not to touch her stuff.” Kate turned her tablet toward Nick and pointed to the date. “See, your game’s today.”

“What?” Nick dropped the cube back in the bag and looked at the date. “Well ... I ... that’s weird.”

On autopilot, Nick stood, rushed upstairs, and got his uniform on.

He grabbed a waffle on his way out to his bike. They lost the game almost the same way he’d remembered it. But how had he remembered it? Had he dreamed it? He spent the rest of the day in déjà vu and was very happy when it was time for bed.



~

Thump! Nick sat up in bed with a start. Something had hit the window hard. This was strange. He got up, looked out the window and saw the poor chickadee lying on the overhang, very dead. Just one chickadee, in the same position he remembered. Still in his pajamas, he rushed downstairs.



“Morning, Nicky. I was about to come wake you. Wouldn’t want you to miss the big game.” Kate turned from the sink and fixed her son with a warm smile. “There’s a stack of waffles keeping warm in the oven.”

“What day is it?” Nick’s eyes widened in alarm. He went right for the bag, saw the cube, and picked it up. The markings glowed faintly red, but wouldn’t budge.

“It’s Saturday.” Kate went back to washing dishes, humming to herself. Her wide hips rocking a little to the beat of her song, swaying her green dress at the knees.

“And Alyson is home and upstairs?” He dropped the cube on the table.

“Yes, and she asked that you not touch her stuff.”

“And Dad’s golfing?” Nick knew the day before hadn’t been a dream. And now he doubted that the day previous had been one either.

“Righto.” Kate nodded, her brown ponytail bouncing.

“Shit.” Nick turned and headed back to his room. He needed to think. He sure as hell wasn’t going to lose the same soccer game three days in a row.

“Language, mister.” Kate called after him.

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Nick didn’t come out of his room until the late afternoon. He found no solution for what was happening, other than to accept he was going crazy.

That night the family sat around the table for dinner. Kate sat next to her husband, Fred. Alyson on the other side of the table next to Nick.

“Did you happen to touch my Sumerian puzzle?” She nudged at his elbow.

“That puzzle, Alyson, could it make someone have the same day over and over again?” Nick was breathing hard, he felt he might start hyperventilating.

“You’ve been reading up on my stuff? What do you know about Enki?” Alyson was impressed, he’d never shown much interest in her studies before.

“Sumerian god, yada yada, doesn’t like his sacred water touched. Tell me.” Nick glanced at his parents, who were looking at him with concern.

“Are you okay, Nicky?” Fred frowned at his son. Soccer was about the only thing Nick was good at, and it wasn’t a good sign that he’d missed the game. “Your mother tells me you missed the big game today.”

“I’m fine. We were going to lose the game anyway,” Nick said in a rush.

“Now, honey, you don’t know that.” Kate reached for her husband’s hand and squeezed it, needing some of his strength. Nick had been so difficult lately, for both of them.

“I do know it.” Nick turned back to Alyson. “Now, about the puzzle and Enki.”

“Well, it was a lesson for a prince. You see, the prince had upset the gods, and had disrespected his mother, the queen. So, Enki gave him the puzzle and made him repeat the same challenges over and over until ...” Alyson looked around the table. “Well, actually, it’s a bit sordid. You know, the Sumerians had different values and everything. And I’m not that familiar with the story anyway.”

“Let’s move away from the puzzle and back to the game.” Fred tried to look stern. “Why’d you skip out, Nicky? We don’t want quitters in this household.”

“You don’t understand, Dad.” Nick stood and rushed out. He raced to his room and spent the rest of the night searching Google for Enki, the puzzle, and whatever else he could find. He finally drifted off to sleep mid-search hours later having learned very little.

~

Thump! Nick sat up in bed with a start. Something had hit the window hard. Nick dropped his head back to the pillow and lay frozen in terror. He knew exactly what he’d see if he looked out the window on the overhang. A cute, little dead chickadee.

And so, the day repeated over and over. It happened so many times that Nick lost count. Some days he played and lost the soccer game, somedays not. About twenty days in, he tried to destroy the puzzle. He did this for many days, but whether he burned it, crushed it, buried it, or tossed it in a lake, it was always in his sister’s bag in the kitchen the next day.

The longer that Saturday reiterated, the more depressed he became. Eventually, to end the loop, Nick tried running away. He stole his mother’s car and drove for hours and hours.

Eventually, he fell asleep at the wheel. He woke the next day to the thump of a small bird hitting his bedroom window.

“You don’t understand. I’m the prince. My day is repeating.” Nick sat in his sister’s room, staring at her poster of Hermione Granger.

“Very funny.” Alyson lay on her bed, enjoying a little

bonding with her brother. It was like the games of make believe they used to play all those years ago.

“For real.” Nick fished his phone out of his pocket and looked at the time. It was 10:31 a.m. “Your dumb fiancé is about to call. He’s going to tell you that he’s stuck doing research in the library and won’t be able to join us for dinner tonight. In three ... two ... one ...”



Alyson's phone rang. She picked it up with a suspicious look on her face and answered the call. "Yeah. Hi, babe." She listened for a bit. "No problem, Chris. Maybe tomorrow." She disconnected and looked at her brother with wide eyes.

"Except there isn't a tomorrow."

"How did you know?" Alyson's face was very pale.

"I wish we could skip this part. It's very tedious for me." Nick explained, for what felt like the millionth time, what was going on. "And you never tell me what the prince did to get out of his loop."

"We've had this conversation before?"

"Yeah. But this time, I have an idea." Nick reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. "There's over a thousand dollars here. All my savings from mowing lawns last summer. Just tell me what the prince did." He waved the money at her.

"I would tell you, but it's a bit sordid. The Sumerians didn't have our values and --"

"Believe me, I know. If I could find the info on my own, I would have. Tell me and the money's yours." He tossed it to her. The money stayed in its roll, held by a thick rubber band.

"Well ... um ... okay. Seems like a fair deal." She took the money.

Nick didn't bother to tell her that he'd just get the money back when the day started over.

"He ... well ... according to the translations we have ... which are incomplete ..." Alyson was stalling. She didn't really like to tell people about this part. It was all academic, and she was being a bit of a prude, but still.

"He kissed his mother, mending their bond. And he apologized to Enki." This was the sanitized version.

"That's it, like a kiss on the cheek? And that fixed everything?"

"Yeah, like that." But Alyson knew it was nothing like that.

"Great." Nick ran out of her room. "I'm sorry for whatever I did to offend you, Enki," he shouted to the hallway ceiling as he ran down to the living room. He hadn't touched any sacred water, had he? He found his mother right where she ought to be, reading a book in the morning sunlight. She was still in her yoga pants, and they hugged her curves a bit too much for Nick's liking. He didn't want to think about his mother's curves, after all. "I'm sorry I've been distant lately." He walked up to her, bent down, and kissed her cheek. "You're the best, Mom."

"Wow, where's this coming from?" Kate took off her reading glasses and looked up at him. Her cheeks flushed a little red.

"I'm just sorry." Nick turned and headed back to the stairs. "I'm going to bed, don't wake me until tomorrow."

"But it's still morning." Kate looked at her watch confused. And then she looked after her son's skinny form as he ran up the stairs. Why wasn't he at his soccer game?

~

Thump! Nick sat up in bed with a start. Something had hit the window hard. "Shit. Shit, shit, shit." He got out of bed and looked out the window at the chickadee. It hadn't worked. What had he done wrong? "Screw you, Enki," He shouted to the empty room. A little while later, he added, "Sorry, Enki. I was just kidding. I'm very sorry. I apologize."

He spent the next few repeating days apologizing to Enki and trying to get more out of his sister. Finally, he hit on the winning formula. He spent most of the day being nice to Alyson, helping her out with her research, and cleaning her room. He made sure to respect her artifacts, and only touched things when she asked. At the end of the day, just before bed, Nick checked in on her. "I'm sorry Chris couldn't make it to dinner."

"Oh, hi, Nicky. It's fine." She patted the bed next to her and he sat down. "You've been very sweet today. I'm glad I'm home. You've helped so much. Anything I can do for you?"

"Well, there is one thing." Nick smiled hopefully, and looked into his sister's sharp, brown eyes. "Could you tell me about how the prince solved his puzzle and got out of the loop?"

Alyson hemmed and hawed for a while, but Nick persisted. She did owe him one. So, much to her discomfort, Alyson told him. Of course, she left out the most sordid details.

"Ewwwwwww. So, he kissed the queen, his own mom, romantically? Like with tongue?" Nick was flabbergasted.

"See, this is why I don't like telling the story to anyone." Alyson rolled her eyes. "It's a story. None of this ever happened. It's just a metaphor for making amends and fixing the family bond."

"That's a strange family. But ... right ... okay ... thanks." Nick marched right out of her room, downstairs to the basement where his parents were watching TV. "Hey, Mom, can I talk to you a minute?"

“Sure, sweetie.” Kate patted her husband’s knee, stood, and followed her son across the basement to a shadowed corner. “What’s going – mmmppppphhhhh.” She could feel his meager chest pushing up against her bust, his mouth was on hers, and his arms held her shoulders. She pushed him hard with both hands and disconnected them. “What the heck, Nicky. No. No. That’s not okay.”

“What’s wrong, honey?” Fred looked over the back of the couch.

“Our son just kissed me on the lips. With tongue.” Kate used the sleeve of her sweater to wipe her mouth.

“That’s it.” Fred stood up. “We’ve had about enough out of you.” Fred walked over and grabbed his skinny son by the collar and dragged him upstairs.

“What sick internet game are you playing? You could use a good beating. I’ve been too lenient with you.” He smacked his son on the ear.

“I’m locking you in your room until you learn to behave.” He smacked him again, harder.



~

Thump! Nick sat up in bed with a start. Something had hit the window hard. Well, that didn’t work. He was so close, but failure didn’t bother him so much as it used to. He would just try again. He spent the next few days following his mom around and trying to help her as much as possible. He complimented her smarts, her omnipresent green dress, her haircut, her cooking, and whatever else he could think of. It was frustrating with each day starting again from scratch. Rather than pile on his new attitude over weeks, he had to find where he could be most effective in the day given to him. He sought out the compliments that brought the widest smile to her face. He had to find the touches that relaxed her shoulders. And he learned to volunteer for tasks that got him the most thanks. But all his attempts ended with her pulling away, slapping him, or, usually, calling Fred. Nick read up on the internet on how to seduce a girl. But he couldn’t find any guides on getting one’s mother to kiss you back. With each failed attempt, he grew more desperate. He asked friends about seducing girls. He texted his on-again-off-again girlfriend, Jess, and peppered her with questions about what she liked about him. She wrote back that he maybe had low self-esteem.

Eventually, he found himself back in his sister’s company. He gave up trying to kiss his mom for days, skipped his soccer game, and hung out with Alyson. Eventually, he explained it all to his sister again.

“So, you’re trying to kiss Mom? That’s crazy.” Alyson turned away from her book and looked over at her little brother. After all the things he’d known would happen that day, she believed him. “You shouldn’t have messed with my puzzle in the first place.”

“Agreed.” He looked up at the ceiling. “I’m sorry, Enki.” He looked back at his sister. “I’m really at the edge here, Alyson. If you were me, what would you do?”

Alyson thought it over for a long time. She didn’t tell him that in the story, the prince also consummated his bond with his sisters. It was possible that if she kissed him, that would free him. But she couldn’t make out with her brother. Could she? No, that was even more crazy than him kissing their mom. She looked down at her engagement ring. Besides, she couldn’t do that to Chris. Not with another man. Especially not her brother. But she could offer some advice. “Well, you should compliment her and help her around the house.”

“I did that.”



“Have you tried getting her drunk?” Alyson had always abstained from drinking at parties because she knew she was only a few drinks away from kissing some random guy. Well, at least that was before Chris. She’d never cheat on him.

“Um ... no.” Nick shook his head, thoughtful. On all those many Saturdays he’d lived in that house, he’d never seen her drink. That was just bad luck, his parents usually shared wine on Saturday evenings.

“And ...” She leaned toward him conspiratorially. “You should probably get Dad out of the house. If he’s around, Mom would never kiss you.” Alyson thought it over. “And you should probably touch her throughout the day. Innocently, I mean, but just get her used to some closeness. And tell her you love her. Hmmmm. That’s what I’ve got.”

“That’s good, Alyson.” Nick nodded. “I still don’t think it’ll work, but, maybe.”

“How will I know it worked and you’re out?” Alyson’s mind was working out the mechanics of her brother’s loop.

“Well, I guess you won’t. Because I’m not going to try it until tomorrow.” Nick pushed his brown hair off his forehead. “Or the next today, I mean. And then you won’t remember any of this when the day resets.”

Alyson’s brow furrowed as she thought of something. “Don’t you dare ever trying something like that on me. It wouldn’t work, and I’d kick your ass.”

“No, of course not.” Nick looked at his sister, and maybe for the first time saw her as a woman. She did have lovely curves tucked under her baggy sweatshirt and jeans. When he thought about it, she was quite pretty. “I’m only doing this with Mom because I have to. It’s gross.” Although, the more he had tried to kiss his mother, the more he’d seen her beauty, too. To the point where, maybe, it would actually be sorta, kinda nice to have her kiss him back. If she ever did. “Dad’s been kicking my ass enough for the both of you anyway.”

“He has?” She looked at him curiously, searching for bruises. But of course, those were from days that reset.

“I’m sorry, Nicky.” She patted him on the thigh.

“No, I’m sure I deserved it.” Nick got up and headed to the door. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck.” She watched him go. Not believing that she was wishing him luck in making out with their sweet, prim mother. He’d need all the luck he could get. She then turned to the puzzle and fished it out of her bag. How had the replica of some ancient Sumerian relic done this to her brother? She didn’t fully understand the markings, but she was going to do her best to figure them out. Chris was the real expert on Sumerian cuneiform. And he was at the library. She got out her phone and texted him. She wouldn’t bother explaining the situation to him. He’d never believe her. But he might help her figure things out.