

CHAPTER 1



Blue Boy

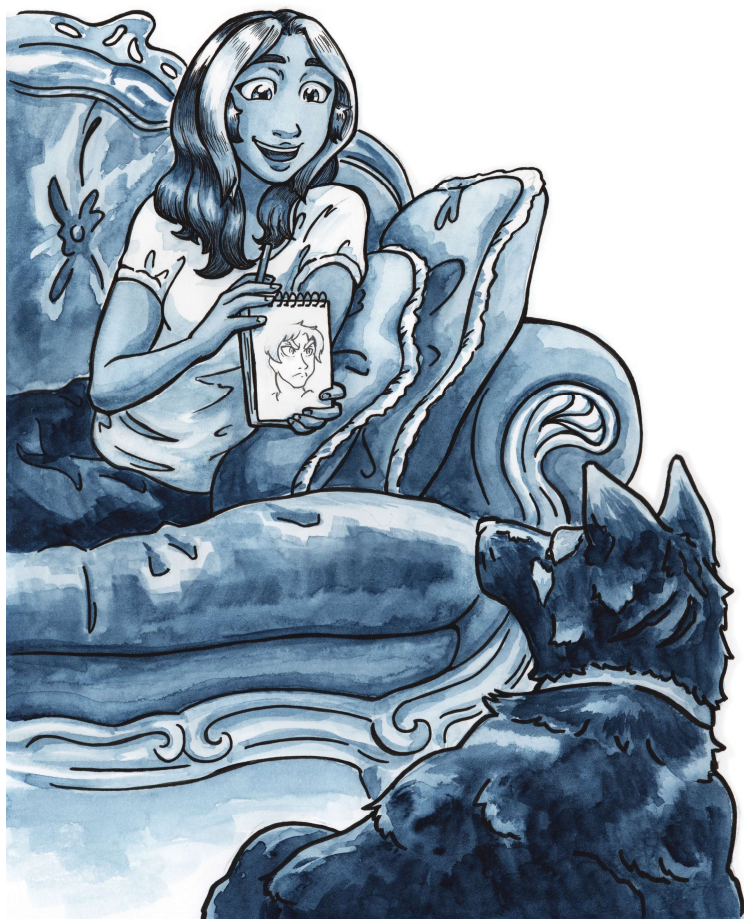
Thursday, February 25th

A vision seized Alice, allowing her to pull a dream from her thoughts and transport it to paper. Her hand reflexively moved as if possessed by a power. It forced the tip of her pencil to create the image dangling in her mind's eye. She eagerly spoke out loud what she had seen to further embed the dream into her memory.

“Don’t you remember me? Don’t you remember my name?” he asked that—to me!” Alice said. “You can’t imagine how much it broke my heart to tell him, ‘No.’”

She scratched furiously at the surface of the paper with her drawing pencil. Although she was short on time, she refused to start the day without finishing the portrait.

“He was devastated,” Alice continued. “Like he had been waiting all these years to find someone and instead discovered me. I’m serious, Shepherd. It was *very* tragic!”



The picture was taking shape. The head tilted down, eyes raised, and brow furrowed. She had imagined he was defiantly staring down a foe or some obstacle. The vertical pupils and scribble of blue hair revealed that the young man was not human.

Setting the pencil aside, Alice turned the pad toward the floor. “Well, Shepherd? What do you think?”

The large black dog raised his head stiffly after making a proud effort to remain still. When he looked at the drawing, he humphed with disappointment. Groaning, Shepherd rested his head between his paws and turned his nose away.

“Oh! You’re such a jealous pup. Did you really think I was drawing you?” Alice laughed. Turning the picture back to her gaze, she smiled sweetly. “I think he’s beautiful. It’s been so long since I’ve dreamt about him that I hardly recognized him. Somehow, I always thought he would be a boy forever—a type of ‘Peter Pan’ or something fairy-like. I wish I could meet him outside of my dreams. The first thing I’d do is apologize for not realizing he was my blue boy.”

Alice heard the front door open. Checking her watch, she noted it was too early for the driver to arrive and looked at Shepherd when he sniffed the air with interest. The dog rose to all fours and began wagging his tail.

“Go see,” Alice said.

Shepherd took off at a rapid trot and disappeared into the hall. Alice heard two distinct barks come from the foyer. Understanding their meaning, she quickly tore the picture from the drawing pad and stuffed it in her book. When Alice stepped into the hall, she found Shepherd prancing like a ridiculous, overgrown puppy around a man. Without speaking, the man used a hand gesture to make the dog sit down and stay. His height was enough to tell Alice who he was, as her head did not even reach his broad shoulders, but her surprise at seeing him still caused her to question his arrival.

“Titus?”

Titus looked at her, allowing the large chandelier to sprinkle his features with light. He had a long, clean-shaven face with high cheekbones and green eyes.

“Good morning, Alice,” Titus said, his face breaking into a smile.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I’m picking you up.” He pulled off his glove and knelt to scratch Shepherd’s neck.

“But why? You never take me to Tallax in the morning.”



“We’ve got special plans today,” he said, pulling her coat from the closet. “Dress warm. It’s freezing out there.”

Alice remembered. Dr. Reinhardt had made arrangements to visit the botanical garden that day. She had been so focused on completing her drawing of the blue boy that she had nearly forgotten.

ALLISON Tanager

Titus helped her into the coat before returning to the closet while Alice fastened the buttons. After slipping her gloves on, she put out her hand to take the scarf and hat he had found.

“I’ve got it,” Titus said.

Alice lowered her hands to her sides. She could not help smiling with amusement at how seriously he treated the whole business. Folding the scarf in half with a delicate motion, Titus tucked it around her neck, leaving no gaps for the cold air to chill her throat. He brushed the blond and brown strands back from her face.

“Did you even brush your hair this morning?” he asked.

“I was in a hurry,” she admitted.

“I can tell.” He gave a little huff of annoyance as he plucked at a knotted tangle.

Titus always liked to look his best, and Alice knew he tried to manage it for her when the opportunity allowed. She expected him to produce a comb and start grooming her, but she was pleased when he checked his watch and gave a resigned shake of his head.

“Take care of it when we get there,” he muttered more to himself than her.

Alice watched as he carefully pulled the hat over her head with a fixed look of concentration. He rested his hands on his hips, looking her over as if considering whether his masterpiece was complete.

“Ready?” Titus asked.

“You tell me,” she said, allowing herself a small laugh.

Alice was pleased when he smirked.

“All right, little Miss Smarty-Feathers!” he said. “You’re lucky your wings are nested, or I’d tie you up in a blanket.”

Nested was the term used when Alice’s feathered wings were absorbed into her back. There were very few places where it was safe to display them, and, as a general rule, they were required to remain hidden. Although this was of no discomfort to Alice, there was always an aching wish to unfold them freely.

“My wings actually work well to keep me warm,” she said. “Maybe you could let me start wearing open-backed clothes, so I don’t have to hide them.”



“Ha! Not a chance, my dear!” Titus said with an attractively deep laugh. Stepping toward the adjoining room, he called back, “Are your things in here?”

“They’re on the couch,” she said, patting the dog. “Bye, Shepherd.”

When Titus returned, Alice’s bag was slung over his shoulder, and her book tucked under his arm. He paused. “Did you want to say goodbye to Dr. Denek before we go?”

“He’s still sleeping. He usually doesn’t get up before I leave.”

A slight frown appeared on Titus’s face. Alice could tell he thought the doctor should always be present to provide her with companionship.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind,” she insisted. “He stays up so late working. He needs the rest. Besides, Shepherd is always happy to keep me company.”

Shepherd gave a firm bark of agreement. Satisfied, Titus opened the front door.

A fresh layer of snow covered the ground, twinkling against the dark morning. Alice imagined a winter imp had made off with a bag of diamonds and accidentally scattered them on her lawn in its hurry to run away.

Titus began descending the stairs but paused when he noticed Alice hesitate by the door.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, catching herself. She looked toward the metallic gray Porsche parked at the foot of the stairs. A look of delight broke over her face. “You brought your car!”

It was indeed a special day if Titus was driving her in his personal luxury vehicle. He opened the passenger door for her as she stepped quickly to catch up to him.

“This can drive in the snow?” Alice asked.

“The roads are dry. I don’t think we should have any trouble.”

Once she took her seat, Titus closed the door. Alice opened her mouth in awe of the interior. It was nothing like the boxy and bland company sedan. The dashboard looked like the console of a fighter jet. Seeing the little gem-like shield logo on the steering wheel, Alice smiled. No, she thought, it was a *prince’s* fighter jet.

Sighing, she breathed in a delightful, spiced scent and sank back into the leather seat with a contented smile. Titus had left the engine running to keep the heat on, making it wonderfully cozy inside. Opening the driver’s side door, Titus passed her bag to the compact back seat while looking over the book’s cover.

Alice’s smile evaporated.

It was not his looking at the book that concerned her. It was what sat nestled between the pages that Alice feared him finding. As if reading her thoughts, Titus opened the book and paused before pulling the drawing out. He looked briefly stunned before his face smoothed into casual indifference.

Titus forced a short breath of amusement and asked, “Getting a little old for imaginary friends, don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t call him that, exactly,” Alice said, clutching her hands in her lap.

“You think he’s real?”

Titus pinched the drawing between his fingers. She was startled as he thrust it toward her as if presenting some incriminating evidence.



For a brief moment, Alice entertained the thought. Why could the boy not be real? She was not human, so the possibility of other beings like herself existing was not unreasonable to consider. Seeing Titus's stern eyes, she looked away. Alice thought the sooner she squashed her silly imagination, the sooner she could get past the disappointment of her loneliness. She was and would always be the only supernatural thing in the world.

"No," Alice said. "I guess not."

“Well, it’s pretty good. I don’t see any eraser marks,” Titus said, flipping the picture back toward his gaze. “Guess those drawing classes are paying off, huh?”

“I guess they are,” she said.

Alice kept her eyes fixed on the snow-covered lawn. She wished he would stop talking about it. It was painful enough for him to comment on the picture, but it was like salt in the wound for him to pretend to know anything about art technique.

“Do you mind if I keep this?” Titus asked.

“No, I don’t mind.”

The answer fell from Alice’s lips before she considered what she was consenting to give. A sudden jab of regret stabbed at her chest, causing her to realize how much she already cherished the drawing. Several replies bloomed in her mind that could have been equal in politeness, all of which would have resulted in the return of her blue boy. However, to deny Titus anything seemed ungrateful and wrong.

Alice remained quiet and looked down at her lap, feeling an unreasonable sense of loss. It was just a piece of paper, she silently told herself. Yet she was already having difficulty remembering his face from the dream and knew it would be impossible to render again.

Alice could not help but painfully watch as he folded the paper and tucked it in the inner pocket of his coat.

“Thanks,” Titus said before looking at the open book in his lap. “I seem to have taken your bookmark.”

“That’s okay,” Alice said anxiously, wanting to finish the ordeal and forget about it entirely. “You can close it. I’ll find the page again.”

“No, let me find something.”

Reaching into his back pocket, Titus withdrew his wallet and slipped out a business card. Neatly placing it in the fold, he handed the book back to her with a smile as if they had conducted an equal exchange of personal tokens. He shifted the car into first gear and accelerated down the long road. Alice opened the book to look at the card and read the name in tall, bold letters: *Titus Conley*. Beneath the name were multiple titles, but the one that caught her eye was *Watcher Training Specialist*.

Titus glanced at the book clasped between Alice's hands. "Do you usually read on your morning ride?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, closing the book. "Mr. Hawkins doesn't talk to me, so I always bring something to read."

"If you're eager to get back to it, don't let me disturb you."

"That's okay. I've read it before."

"What is it?"

"It's called *Endymion*. It's an epic poem about a Greek shepherd who falls in love with the moon goddess."

"Are you enjoying it?"

"Not as much this time as I have before."

"Why?"

"It's unrelatable."

"Relate to you? If you're looking for something with heavenly beings, I wouldn't bother with pagan mythology." Titus glanced at the frayed cover of the book. "It looks like an antique anyway. When was it written?"

"The early nineteenth century."

Titus laughed, but pleasantly, without being mocking. "That's still a bit old. Doesn't Dr. Denek have anything published in his library within the last hundred years for you to read?"

"I don't think so. I think he only has this one because it's about an ancient myth."

"I don't understand how he thinks he can keep a young lady like you entertained with such dry, old books," Titus said, grinning. "That guy is so old-fashioned. I expect to find him driving to work with a horse and buggy."

Alice clapped her hand over her mouth as she broke into laughter. It took her a moment to contain it, which embarrassed her.

"I shouldn't laugh, but the more I think about it, I can easily see it."

"Do you ever wish you lived with someone else?" Titus asked.

"I love Dr. Denek," Alice said. She lowered her hand, revealing a warm smile. "I wouldn't trade him for anyone!"

Before long, the houses became less frequent until they had been driving through an isolated forest for several minutes. Turning down a side road, they arrived at a gate. Titus pulled up to a keypad and deftly typed in the required code. When the gate rose, the Porsche engine roared as he drove through. A barbed-wire fence now surrounded them on each side.

They came to a pair of large spotlights focused in the center of the road. Another gate barred the way, forcing the car to a stop. Titus merely flashed his badge at the guards, and they allowed the car to pass.

Immediately after the checkpoint was a large welcome sign posted overhead. In tall, elegant letters was the company name Tallax. Beneath was a statement that read, *Center for Research and Technology; Divine Solutions to Human Problems.*

Alice often felt the sign was congratulating them for making it past the security. She silently laughed, imagining they had been deemed worthy to enter the hallowed grounds and that trumpets were announcing their arrival.

Titus put the vehicle in park and turned off the engine. He grabbed her bag and stepped out of the car. Alice was a little slower, sorry to leave the comfort of the vehicle. She looked at the cars in the lot, noticing there seemed to be a few more than usual.

It was not uncommon to see visitors, usually private investors, scientists, or other government representatives, come to observe what new and exciting innovations Tallax had in development. But it was early in the day for an official tour. Perhaps, Alice supposed, it was a certificate auditor or some people from the health department. She knew about the tight requirements Tallax must follow when designing and manufacturing medical devices and lab-made pharmaceuticals. These projects funded most of their operations. But for the more revolutionary research, government involvement and funding were necessary. That was where the Watcher department stood, as Tallax's most significant and secretive investment. At least, that was how Titus had explained it.

Alice remembered she was supposed to be following Titus and took a few hopping steps to catch up to him. They avoided



the main entrance and walked toward an unassuming side door. Titus pressed his badge to a scanner, unlocking the entry. A delicate chime greeted them as they entered a quiet hall.

Titus pulled off his cap and brushed his hand through his red hair, fluffing it back into short spikes. “Go drop off your stuff and meet me back at my office,” he said as he unzipped his heavy coat while shouldering through a door.

Alice only took a few steps away when he yelled after her, “And brush your hair, or I’ll do it for you!”

She was reminded that her hurry had been all for nothing since he had taken the blue boy drawing. Snatching the hat off her head, Alice entered a small apartment. She threw her coat on the bed and strode up to a vanity table, where she found a brush. Tearing away at her hair, Alice fought with a few knots before she began to stroke more thoughtfully. As she looked into the mirror, she noticed in the reflection a package sitting on the small desk.

Setting the brush aside, Alice called out toward the open door, “What is this?”

She heard Titus’s voice call back from his office, “What’s what?”

“This package in my room.”

“Is it a little white box?”

“Yes.”

“Not a clue.”

Alice half smiled as her eyes narrowed. He was teasing her.

“Am I allowed to open it?” she called back.

“Yes,” Titus said. “I would even encourage it.”

Opening the box, Alice found a potted plant. It had long green strands with waxy, almond-shaped leaves. At the end of several strands were clusters of tiny, star-shaped buds. She read the label.

“It’s a hoyal!” she said. “I was just telling you about these the other day!”

She cradled the pot in her arm, hugging it to her chest, and watched the buds dance beneath her face. Extending her fingers, Alice held her hand over the pot and sensed the fragile life within the small plant.

“Hello,” she said softly. “I’d love to see you bloom. Would you do that for me?”

The flowers slowly began to open as if waking from a deep slumber. Each bud revealed a red, waxy flower with a yellow star in the center. She invited more to awake, forming an entire sphere of flowers that offered a sweet scent.

“Do you like it?” Titus asked.

Alice looked toward the open door to find him standing in the hall. He was leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. He watched her with a smile that accentuated his appealingly masculine features. Surprised by his sudden appearance, Alice immediately dropped her face to hide the blush rising to her cheeks. Pretending to study the plant more closely, she hoped the warmth in her face would disappear before he noticed.

“Yes, thank you,” she said quietly, setting the plant on the table.

She moved to walk out of the apartment, lowering her head when she paused to look over his uniform. It was a charcoal tactical jacket with the Tallax logo. While nothing exceptional to look at as far as fashion was concerned, there were only certain occasions she had seen him wear the jacket.



It suddenly put meaning to everything Titus had done that morning. Picking her up in his car, fussing over her appearance, and the gift all had a purpose. He was pretreating her before inflicting a wound.

Alice looked up at him, no longer afraid of exposing a blush. The extra warmth of color had fled from her face.

“We’re not going to the botanical garden this morning, are we?” she asked.

Half of Titus's smile fell into an odd slant. She knew the answer before he said it.

"No. I'm afraid we have other plans."

"It's a military demonstration," Alice stated. Titus nodded. "What is it?"

"A Target trial."

Alice suddenly became aware of the growing anxiety clenching at her chest. Taking a breath, she asked, "Is it a Co-op?"

The other half of Titus's smile fell. He looked troubled. "No, Alice. They want to see you perform alone."

Alice's brow pinched. For a moment, she thought of stepping back into the apartment and slamming the door in his face. As if anticipating this, Titus stepped forward, gathering her hands between his own. He smiled at her with an apologetic look in his eyes.

"You're not going to be alone," he said. "I'll be coaching you."

"Yeah, from the viewing deck," Alice said miserably. "I don't understand why they need to see me fight alone with a Target. Haven't I done enough demonstrations to prove I'm capable?"

"You have, but Colonel Lasseter is here this time, and he's a real hard case." Titus's thumb stroked over the top of her hand as if trying to physically smooth her ruffled nerves. "Remember, I trust your talents. You trust my guidance, okay?"

Since removing her gloves, Alice's fingers had gone cold. Gradually, the warmth returned as Titus pressed them. His light-colored palms completely enveloped her slight brown hands. She was not often reminded of the contrast of their skin color. The fact that he was comfortable with not only touching but holding her hands made Alice feel secure and accepted.

Looking at his eyes, she could tell he was still worried about her.

I AM NO BIRD

“I’ll be okay,” Alice said. She tried to raise the corner of her lips, but now it was her turn with the funny smile.

“I’m sorry about this,” Titus said. “I know you were expecting something good today, and I threw the opposite in your lap. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?”

Alice hesitated. For a moment, she thought she might ask him to return the stolen drawing but found she did not possess the heart to speak up. It had come to her attention that the blue boy made Titus uncomfortable, and she could see he was anxious enough as it was.

“No, there’s nothing you need to do,” she said softly, commanding herself to smile. “I recognize this is out of your control, and I appreciate what you’re trying to do to make it easier for me. Thank you, Titus.”

