

Tina Gao

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Louis Pizitz Middle School, Vestavia, AL

Educators: Keith Beard, Kevin Zhen

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Equus Forme

After closing my eyes and sucking in a deep breath, I remind myself: this is just another day. With a hand against the wall, I gingerly step toe to heel, muffling my footsteps on the tiles, shivering at the beeping, whirring, humming and struggling groans from the rooms.

Why did Jonathan choose to volunteer in this hospital? I want to return to our tribe and our home in the forest, but Jonathan forces me to here with him because of this stupid pact with the Outerim. I mean, we unicorns, or equus, naturally want to help all these dying people, but all our magic lightstream would drain once we complete a revival. I just want to get away from all these suffering, dying patients.

Jonathan tackles me from behind. “You look like you’re mad enough to expose your horn and spew enough lightstream to break the walls.”

I shove him away, “Who cares? Why do you want to sacrifice our sanity for this filthy world? Life with the tribe is perfectly fine! We could do practically anything we wanted as long as we stayed away from humans and never revealed our equus forme. You wasted two years of kissing up to our superiors to trade our paradise for a warzone, without lightstream!”

Jonathan clamps his hand over my mouth, pushes me against the stinking wall, and counters, “First of all, unicorns are popular among humans nowadays, so it’s ok if our horns slip out once in a while.” Pushing back his blond bangs, he points at the crimson scar, round as a dollar coin, centered on his forehead. “It is our duty, an equus tradition, to heal the Outerim. It is up to us to restore the pact!”

I knew he would bring that up. Our tribe used to remain in equus forme and generously heal humans, so we believed that we had a pact with the Outerim. The pact proved to be nonexistent because those cruel humans hunted us once they invented guns. I can’t imagine Jonathan would prefer being a horse and licking the wounds of murderers.

Pressing his hand against my exposed scar, he whispers, “I came to warn you about our new patient. She’s not in the best condition- and we want to make her comfortable.”

Before I can close my eyes, he shoves me into an unfamiliar nook and presses his volunteer card on a panel. A double door unlocks.

The ward feels like a tomb prepared for the afterlife. Offerings of unopened gifts, rotted roses, and expired chocolates cram the tables. Even a glistening pastoral landscape spans an entire wall: Amidst clovers and daisies, the girl wraps her arms around an equus’ neck, silver mane and satin ribbons fluttering in the breeze.

Robotic arms, lights, and computers cage the raised bed in the center of the room. Tethered by wires and buckles underneath the starched white quilt, head cushioned by her bronze curls, a girl blinks at the ceiling with marbly eyes, unmoving.

“Hello Anna, how are you?” Jonathan asks.

A grunt replies. I follow him to Anna’s bed, wiping my trembling hands against my shirt.

“Do you like unicorns?” I whisper. Eyelashes as thin as golden sunlight cast shadows like forest leaves onto wan cheeks. Eyes closed and sniffling, Anna sinks into her bedsheets, stiller, paler, colder. Jonathan holds his hand in front of her nose. Not even the slightest breath filters through his fingers. Inch by inch, I extend my hand and touch her cool, rigid chest. My hand recoils and I wipe it on my pants. I can’t bear to see her die.

Forehead wrinkling, scar burning, Jonathan dashes into the hall, shirttail billowing behind him. As soon as the door slams shut, my horn, a transparent spear bursts through my forehead. I plant one foot toward the door and another toward Anna, unmoving in either direction. Did the equus really stand, proud and serene, amidst the filthy Outerim? I stiffen each second, waiting and praying, petrified. With a jolt, my limbs, back, and head elongate; I crash onto the floor, mane flapping in my face, all four legs sprawled in all directions. Have I mentioned transforming isn’t graceful at all?

I examine my reflection in a railing. My ears resemble a donkey’s, my eyes are beady, and my nose is fat. It should’ve been majestic Jonathan, deserving the moment fit for a painting. But once I lift my hoof in the air, I gasp. An unexplainable desire to run and fly, fluid and strong, with Anna on my back surges through me.

I concentrate all the strength I have into an energizing spell, orange sparks that lift me onto my hooves and whirl around my horn. Directing the sparks into her body, I raise my head over her bed, tossing my mane until it cascades over the wires and tethers. Anna pushes herself up and gazes at me. White, silky hair flows between her fingers when Anna reaches for me. She answers my question from minutes ago, “I love unicorns.”

The door bangs open and Jonathan’s sneaker steps over the threshold. Gaping at my orange, glowing lightstream, his horn rips through his scar, firing a transparent block at my energizing spell. He screams, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

Mouth open, arms extended, Anna collapses onto her bed. She stares at the ceiling, never moving again.

“I-I-I don’t know why I did that.” I stammer, reverting to my normal forme.

Jonathan furrows his eyes, “What were you doing in the equus forme? Did you know you were about to waste all your lightstream to revive a stranger?”

Our breaths synchronize. Out of the corner of my eye, I spy a painting of Anna hugging one of us. Now I understand why Jonathan always wanted to restore the pact, revive the bond, but he ruined his own wish. I wheeze, “I- I just couldn’t.”

Jonathan’s eyes narrow. “You just wanted to go home!”

“No! Of course not!”

“I can’t believe you. An hour ago, you begged to go home. We must go home. I don’t know how our superiors will punish us for violating the most important law. We must set this straight.” Jonathan sighs. He gazes at Anna, outstretched on the bed as if she was resting from a long horseback ride, “I should’ve gave up after five fruitless years of watching people suffer. She was going to die anyways. There was nothing we could do about that.”