

Megumi Mandish

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Polaris and Dragonflies

After supper he would always take her out to see the stars. In the winter, Seren's father would make them both steaming mugs of hot cocoa, with little marshmallows and a sprig or two of mint– 'to make it refined', he would tell her. 'We should be allowed to feel fancy when we wish', he would add after. They sat on the porch with their mugs, sometimes she on his lap, but usually side-by-side. They bundled up in thick fur blankets and drew pictures in the snow with sticks from the kindling pile.

In the summer, they ventured farther. They laid out their largest blanket in the middle of the empty field, and searched for bugs in the tall grass: usually beetles and moths and crickets, but sometimes they got lucky and would find a mantis or bumblebee, or even a swarm of fireflies. She carefully put them in little glass jars and tied cloth over the tops, and brought them back to her father, who read out facts about each of her prize catches from a weathered little book with detailed insect pictures on the faded yellow cover.

Tonight was one such night. Seren grinned to herself as she scooped up a net of dust and dead grass, and with it, her elusive prize. She squatted in the dirt and lifted the net up just enough to see a flutter of long wings and a bright green and blue body crawl between the mesh folds of its cage.

"Seren, honey, did you catch it?"

"I caught it!" Seren scurried through the grass and plopped down on the blanket, holding out her net. Her father peered through it with a furrowed brow, searching for the insect, then chuckled.

"Another darner, huh? Been catching a lot of those lately."

"Yeah, they're real pretty!" Seren patted down her overalls, shaking the dust off of them.

Her father laughed again.

"Sure are. You all done bug-catchin', kiddo?"

"I wanted to catch a Meadowhawk, but they're too small. 'Sides, they don't like the grass up here."

"No, they do not. I reckon most of them are by the river right about now." Her father smiled and looked back to his book, squinting a little in the dimming sunlight. "Well, I think we got a little while before the sky gets dark. You want me to read a few pages?"

Seren freed the darner, then settled into his lap and listened to him read, trying to follow along with the words on the page as he underlined them with his finger, though most of it just looked like black scribbles to her. The sky turned orange and pink, then grey, until finally she could barely see even her father's hands in front of her. A finger turned her chin upwards, and they both stared at the starry sky in silence.

"Takes my breath away every time," her father said quietly.

Seren squirmed around to try to find his face. "But you're still breathing."

He laughed. A hand ruffled her hair. "It's just something folks say, honey." He paused for a minute. "You can see Ursa Major and Minor up there."

Seren searched the stars for the telltale spoon-shaped constellations. "Uh huh. You said the little bear's your favorite."

"Yeah, well it was your Momma's favorite too."

Seren frowned. "Where is Momma? You always say she went somewhere really far away."

Her father sighed. "She did, kiddo. Somewhere you and me and everyone else can't get to."

"Is she lonely?" Seren's grip tightened on her father's arm. Was her mother stuck somewhere? Maybe she had run away from Seren and her father. "Does she miss us?"

"She misses us, just like we miss her." Her father hugged her closer. "But she's not lonely, don't worry. She's keeping watch over you and me all the time."

"How come I never see her?"

"You do."

She could make out the outline of her father's hand in the darkness, pointing to one of the stars in Ursa Minor. It shone brightly, far more than the rest of the stars in the sky—Seren always noticed it first. Something about its bright light drew her to it every night.

"Polaris, the North Star." His voice grew soft. "That's where your Momma's been, every night, watching over you and me. And she's been telling all the stars about you, and how happy and proud she is of you."

"Really?" Seren stared up at her mother, glittering in the sky above. "Every night?"

"Every night, kiddo."

Seren had never thought the stars looked more beautiful.