



The 5th Experiment

I dashed through the trees, hand on my dagger. My heart felt like it was going to burst out of my chest. I was on my way to my favorite fishing spot when I heard a rustling noise in the distance.

Who could possibly be out in the forest at this time of night?

I came upon a man trying to climb a rotting oak tree. He wasn't dressed for the task, and his physique suggested that he didn't spend much time outdoors. He was scrawny, pale, and almost homely-looking. His wardrobe wasn't much better; it resembled my grandfather's outfits.

He definitely doesn't belong in the forest.

After observing his futile attempts to scale the 30-foot giant for a moment, I decided to do some investigating.

Clearing my throat, I asked, "What are you doing, sir?" I wanted to be respectful. From behind, this man seemed to be middle-aged; at *least* forty years old.

"Huh? Oh, hello," the man said.

I still couldn't see his face, and at this point, I was getting impatient. "Why don't you come down from there?" I suggested, trying to prevent an injury.

"Did you say something?" He shouted back down at me.

Does he have a hearing problem? I should help this guy, but I don't want to be late for midnight fishing.

I decided to do the right thing. "Sir, can you hear me?" I asked, in an adequately loud voice.

"Yes," he said hesitantly, "but what is that ruckus?"

This guy is a nutcase!

"You may be hearing the owls, sir. Sometimes they're quite animated and--"

"Excuse me," the man yelled. "You can quit calling me 'sir,' lady. I can't be much older than you."

Did he just interrupt me? I was trying to help him, but maybe he's better off alone.

Suddenly, the man jumped off of the tree trunk and landed right in front of me.

I gasped, "You're not old at all! You can't be more than thirty years old."

"Close, dear. I'm twenty-six years old, to be exact."

I couldn't hide my surprised expression at this information. "You're younger than me!"

"Do you think I look older than that?"

I couldn't believe his ignorance. "Do you know what you're wearing?"

He glanced down at his outfit and said, "Yeah, a flannel shirt and some khakis. Oh, and loafers."

“Exactly,” I smirked. “You can’t blame me for thinking you were old. You’re wearing old people clothes. But enough about your appearance; what are you doing out here so late?”

“Oh, I was trying to get some leaves for my friend,” he said.

“Why so late at night?”

Why is this taking so long?

“Because I didn’t have enough time earlier in the day.”

“Okay, whatever,” I sighed, ready to move on. “Let’s start over. I’m Willow. What’s your name?”

“Caspian. Nice to meet you, Willow.”

“Enchantée.”

“Huh?” He asked.

“Never mind.”

I really should get back and start practicing again. I want to be able to disappear whenever I want by the end of July.

You see, I wasn’t just a normal hunter living out my days in the forest. In fact, I was able to disappear. I know, it sounds ridiculous and totally made-up. But it’s completely true. One day, when I was simply minding my own business, I came across a lake that was brimming with trout. I couldn’t ignore it, of course. Anyone that knows me knows I’ll never pass up an opportunity to fish. As I started to bait my hook and cast the line, a small toad hopped over to me. Obviously, seeing a toad is common in the woods. But this toad was

different. It had brought me a message. I reached for the note that was stuck in its mouth. It croaked and went on its merry way towards the opposite side of the forest.

The content of that note shocked me. My life was forever changed.

“Where do you live, Caspian?”

“I don’t have a real home. I don’t like to be tied down, so I usually just move from place to place, camping on a spot of dry ground.”

“Interesting. Well, I don’t think you should be wandering around this late at night. There are wolves out here, you know. You don’t want to get eaten alive, do you?” I couldn’t believe a grown man wasn’t aware of the dangers that live in the forest.

“Wolves, schmolves. I know how to take care of myself,” he confidently stated.

This guy is either really stupid or way too full of himself.

“Listen, I’m just trying to help you out. I’d rather not hear about a death that I could’ve prevented.”

“I appreciate it, but I’m fully capable of looking after my—”

Just then, a toad jumped out from behind a tree trunk. It was the same toad that I’d met all those years ago. The sudden movement startled Caspian, and he looked terrified. I was caught off-guard as well, but only because it was the same mysterious creature. This time, the toad carried a lantern in its mouth. *Why did it bring me that? I already have a flashlight in my backpack.*

I reached to grab my flashlight to somehow prove I didn't need the lantern, but it was gone. *I must've left it at home. Today is not my day!*

"Thanks, toad," I said, accepting the gift. The toad, once again, hopped away in the other direction.

Caspian was completely freaked out. It was then that I knew he shouldn't be alone.

"What's wrong? Haven't you seen a toad before?"

"Of course I have. I've just never been that close to one," he stuttered. Even in the dark, I could see that he was shaking with fright.

"C'mon, let's go back to my cave."

"What? I'm not coming with you," he argued.

"Sure you are. We both know you're not fit to be alone. I have an extra bed and you can stay there until you get your bearings."

"Okay, but I'm only staying one night."

"Fine with me," I said.

As we walked back to my home, I kept replaying the events of the last hour in my head. Everything was so out of the ordinary. *I wonder if he's the other Experiment. I thought he was killed months ago.*

The message that the toad gave me contained important information about the whereabouts of my fellow mutants. Back in 2019, AGFTI, the Association for Gifted Fairy-Tale Individuals, started a program called Experiment 1 to advance American society. AGFTI was founded in 2018 after a mutation caused by a chemical leak into Lake Erie. The mutated citizens instantly

gained the ability to do all sorts of things like flying, time traveling, disappearing (that's mine), combusting, and more. At first, AGFTI wanted to remove us mutants from society. They were terrified of what could happen if our powers spun out of control.

After discussing their options with the federal government and chemistry labs all over the globe, AGFTI decided to conduct a trial (Experiment 1) to see if the mutants could benefit society. There were about 200 mutants and they were contained in Ohio. For the first 2 years, everything was great for most of us. 45 or so died off during that time due to flight accidents, overstimulation, and fatal fires. They were too anxious and exercised their powers too often. The rest of us had normal lives because we worked during the day and only practiced our powers at night. Sometimes I think about the people that died during the first years of the trial run, and I feel sorry for them. They didn't know that they should've taken it easy with their powers. After all, no one knew how to treat mutants during that time.

I was only 17 when the mutation happened. As soon as my parents found out what happened, they kicked me out of the house. I lived with my aunt for a while, but she quickly grew annoyed that I would disappear occasionally. I couldn't help it. I didn't choose it, but this was my life now. But I tried to make the best of it. I had a good job that supported me and allowed me to increase my power on the weekends. Most of my friends were Experiments as well, and they understood my situation.

In 2020, bad things started happening. The government decided that the Experiments' power was too strong and it was interfering with the general population. Apparently, people were complaining that we brought "unfair advantages" in the workplace. As a result, AGFTI was forced to declare Experiment 1 a failure. I was extremely upset. After all, I had a great life and I didn't want anything to change. I had just started dating this guy who could fly, and we were a great match for each other. I didn't want anyone to take him away from me.

The AGFTI decided to move all the Experiments, along with their spouses and children, to Alaska. Don't ask me why they picked Alaska. It seems like the worst possible place for mutants, but I guess they wanted to isolate us from the rest of the US. In March of 2021, helicopters started flying to Ohio, retrieving the Experiments. I didn't want to go to Alaska, but I knew my boyfriend would be with me. I was supposed to get picked up on March 17th at the fire station. As I was packing my bags a few days earlier, I flipped on the local news to see my boyfriend's picture on the TV screen. He died in a helicopter's crash landing. Spurred by the grief his death caused me, I moved to the woods and cut off all communication with my loved ones. Remember the note that the toad gave me? Well, the message inside of it was that there were only 5 Experiments left in Ohio. After I realized my helicopter left me behind, I assumed there was a misunderstanding and I would get picked up in a few days. But after 2 years, I accepted the fact that they had forgotten about me completely. It's not that surprising, since all of

my friends died before they had been in Alaska a week. I knew if they'd survived, they would've mentioned me to the authorities.

After I received this message from the toad, I searched for the other Experiments that were left behind. I wanted to be understood again. Over the course of several months, 4 of them died of starvation. For a while, I looked for the 5th Experiment. But he was nowhere to be found. After I had been in the forest for 5 years, I stopped looking. I accepted that I would live in the forest alone and continue to grow my power to disappear.

A few months ago, I heard that the 5th Experiment died. I wasn't too surprised at this news; not many could survive the dangers in the forest. The government didn't know that the extraction plan had failed, so they thought the US was completely mutant-free. That's why we were forced to reside in the woods.

Seeing Caspian made me think that he might be the 5th Experiment. It seemed impossible, yet he fit the description: tall, lanky, late 20's.

The sun streaming through the makeshift door of my cave woke me the next morning. I had forgotten that Caspian spent the night, but his snoring from across the room reminded me.

I need to find out if he's the other Experiment, but how?

Maybe there's some clues in his satchel.

I snuck over to his bed and quietly grabbed his bag from the floor. Its contents were anything but exciting. I found a comb (*really?*), chapstick, his

wallet, gum...*Oh, a wallet!* I opened it to find his driver's license, \$40 in cash, and an insurance card.

Not as exciting as I'd hoped. Just then, Caspian stirred in his sleep. I put everything back in the satchel and went outside to use the bathroom.

Hopefully he'll be awake when I return so I can ask him some questions.

When I returned to my cave, Caspian was slipping his loafers on.

"Hey," I said.

"Oh, hi. You frightened me!"

"Sorry about that. Didn't mean to sneak up on you. How did you sleep?"

"Pretty well. Better than expected for a cave's spare bed," he answered.

"I'm glad to hear that. Listen, I need to talk to you about something."

"Okay, what is it?"

"Have you ever heard of the Association for Gifted Fairy-Tale Individuals?" I asked.

"Of course I know about AGFTI. Who doesn't?"

"Okay, okay, no need to get defensive. I just wanted to make sure before I continue," I explained. After taking a deep breath, I started to confess. "Look, I don't know how to say this, but I'm the 6th Experiment. I was supposed to be exiled to Alaska 8 years ago, but my helicopter left me behind. Do you know anything about the 5th Experiment? I thought he died months ago, but then when I saw you, I don't know...it's silly, isn't it? To think you could be the

5th Experiment, the person I've been searching for to make sense of everything," I sighed.

"That's not crazy at all," Caspian assured me. "I *am* the 5th Experiment."

"Seriously?!" I exclaimed. "So I'm not alone in this crazy situation! I can't believe I finally found you." We embraced then, partly from excitement and partly from loneliness. We had both wandered around these woods for years, searching for somewhere to belong. Let me tell you, I had never felt more accepted in my life.