

KELLEY SKOVRON

THE GHOST OF
DROWNED
MEADOW

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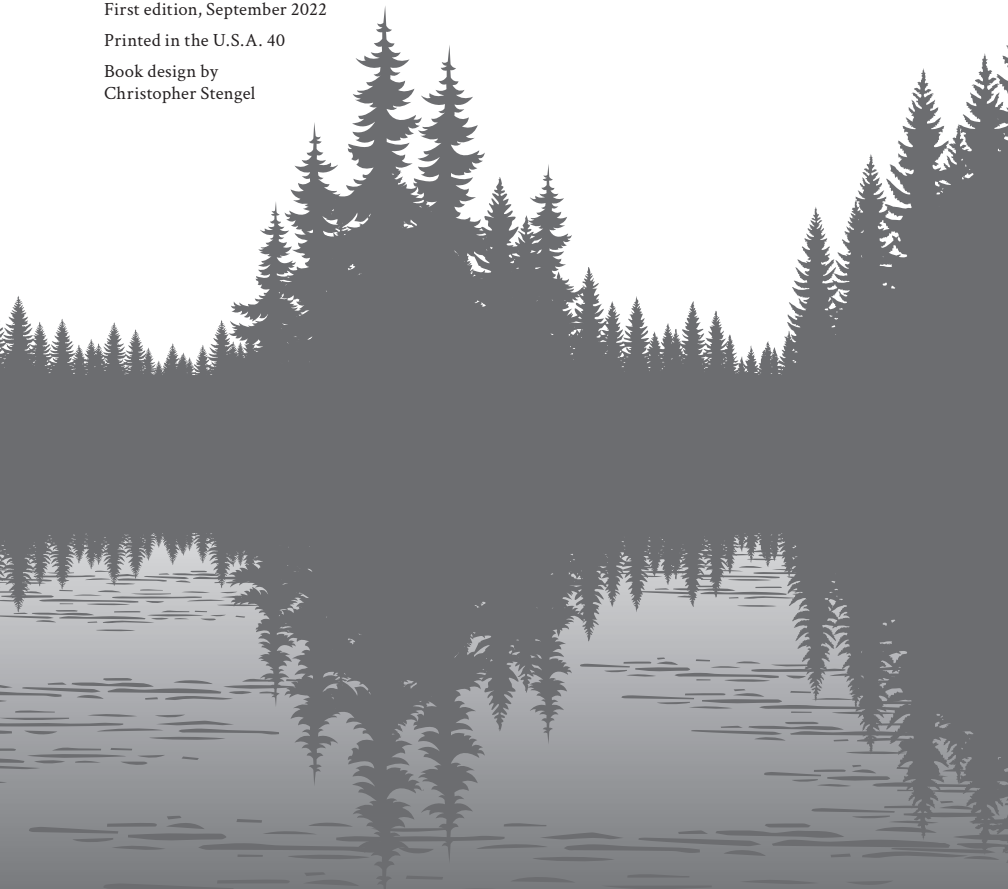
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CHAPTER

ONE

The first time it happened, Morgan Calvino was rereading one of her favorite Japanese light novels, *My Secret Dream of a Boring Life, Volume 1*. She was stretched out on her bed, a half-full can of coconut seltzer on the small table beside her. A cool evening breeze drifted in through the open window, tickling her bare shins and feet.

This was probably the seventh or eighth time that Morgan had read the first volume of *My Secret Dream of a Boring Life* by Sensō Tori. She'd begun just after dinner, and was already at chapter four, where the

protagonist, Zophia Zye the Night Queen, magically disguises herself as a human so that she can travel among them without frightening anyone. Naturally she brings along her loyal frost spirit, Zsa Zsa, who is now disguised as an adorable white kitten.

This chapter was one of Morgan's favorites in the whole series. Zophia and Zsa Zsa are walking through the forest, still adjusting to their new human and cat forms, when they are set upon by a pack of wolflings. Of course, such pitiful monsters are nothing compared to the power of the Night Queen, but the human adventurer Kosuke and his friends happen along and mistakenly think she needs their help.

He was slim, with shaggy black hair, refined features, and an earnest expression.

"Hey, miss! Can you use a sword?"

I wasn't sure what he was getting at.

"Yes, I have had some instruction in swordsmanship..."

"Great! Feel free to help out!"

Then he tossed a small sword at my feet.

TAP

I looked down at the blade. It was easily the most pathetic weapon I'd ever seen. The well maintained. The binding was frayed, and the flimsy steel was edged with rust.

Then I looked back at the human, who was smiling innocently at me.

"He's serious," I muttered to Zsa Zsa. "He actually thinks he's helping me."

"So it would seem, my queen."

TAP

"And now he's waiting for . . . gratitude?"

"That would be traditional under the circumstances as he understands them, Your Majesty."

"We shall see how well this human understands the circumstances once I turn this entire meadow to ash!"

TAP

Morgan closed her book. What *was* that tapping sound? It was like the steady annoying drip from a faucet, except coming from outside her window.

She leaned across her bed and looked out into the darkness. It wasn't raining. In fact, the purple night sky was completely clear. So where was the sound coming from?

Then she realized that the tapping had stopped.

She peered across the street to the moonlit harbor. She could just make out yachts dotting the black, rippling water. She could hear the faint *ting* of the rope lines that knocked against their aluminum masts as the boats swayed in the wind. She could hear the distant bark of a dog. But she no longer heard the dripping sound.

“Weird . . .”

She leaned back into her bed, fluffed her pillow, then opened the book to where she'd left off. It was the first meeting between Zophia Zye the Night Queen and Kosuke the human. Since Morgan knew how close the two characters would become in later volumes, she

really enjoyed going back and laughing at how awkward they were together at first.

The thing was, Kosuke didn't realize that Zophia was the Night Queen in disguise, so he was just treating her like she was a regular human girl. And even though Zophia was trying to *act* like a regular human girl, she didn't really know how to do that yet, so she kept getting offended that she wasn't being given the proper respect:

I decided I would show this foolish human just how much of an insult his pathetic sword was. I began to cast the tenth-tier spell Incandescent Blaze of Lava's Birth. My hands rose to form the intricate movements, and my mouth opened to speak the prayer of Kagutsuchi the fire god.

TAP

"I hate to interrupt when you are in such a beautifully righteous rage, my queen," Zsa

Zsa said mildly. “But I suspect that once you cast a spell in the lost language of the gods, this human and his companions will no longer believe you to be one of them, and everything we have done to get to this point will have been for naught.”

TAP

“But I can’t just let him think he’s saving me,” I protested. “As though I’m some helpless—”

TAP

“Okay, *seriously* . . .” Morgan groaned as she once more closed her book and looked out the window. The sky remained clear.

The sound was incredibly annoying. But where was it coming from? A dripping air-conditioning unit, maybe? But it wasn’t hot enough for that anymore. And now that she thought about it, this house had

central heating and air, so window AC units weren't even a thing around here.

Maybe she was just hearing things. After all, she still hadn't gotten used to how quiet it was out on Long Island. In Brooklyn there had always been background noise. Cars, buses, trains, horns honking, people shouting, alarms going off. It had all mixed together into a steady drone that she could wrap around herself like a cozy blanket. She hadn't realized how comforting it had been until she lost it. Now it was one of the many things she missed since moving out of the city.

Not that Port Jefferson wasn't nice. The harbor was pretty, with all its fancy sailboats bobbing around. The nearby downtown was cute, with little shops and restaurants. She also liked having a house instead of a tiny apartment. And she had to admit that in general, things smelled a whole lot better. But she even missed some of those Brooklyn smells, like the food from old Mr. Zhao's restaurant on the corner.

Morgan sighed and turned back to her book. At least she still had the Night Queen. She gazed down at the

manga-style illustration on the cover, which showed Zophia Zye in her true oni form: tall, regal, with blue skin and long, white, jagged hair. She wore an elegant black gown and a cape with a high collar. Morgan didn't think it was possible for someone to be cooler or more beautiful in this world or any other than the Night Queen.

Of course, Morgan had already read all ten books in the *My Secret Dream of a Boring Life* series, and the manga adaptation as well. But since the move to Long Island, she'd found that rereading those books, especially the first few volumes, made her feel a little less lonely.

She was just getting ready to dive back into the world of the Night Queen when she heard her mother's voice from the doorway.

"Don't forget it's a school night."

Marissa Zeggini was medium height, with dark wavy hair like Morgan's and the piercing gaze of a trial lawyer. She'd changed out of her suit after dinner and now wore a comfy set of yellow pajamas. Her arms were folded across her chest and one eyebrow was

raised. What she was really saying was, *Don't you think it's time to go to bed?*

Morgan sighed. "I know, I know."

She closed the window, put her book on the bedside table, and slid under her covers.

Her mother came in and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "Good night, sweetie."

"Did you hear a loud dripping sound?" Morgan asked.

Her mother frowned. "When?"

"Just now."

Her mom tucked her in, even though she didn't need it. "Sometimes when you feel lonely, your mind plays tricks on you."

"I'm not lonely," Morgan protested, even though she definitely was.

Her mother smiled gently and smoothed Morgan's hair back from her forehead. "Morgan, sweetie, maybe if you tried a little harder to make friends at school, you'd feel better."

"I *do* try. It's just that nobody's into the same stuff that I'm into. All they ever talk about is clothes and

boys and wakeboarding. I don't even know what wakeboarding is."

"It's like waterskiing, but with a board instead of skis," her mom said. "It's actually a lot of fun."

"Well, I've never done it, and they all have."

"I'm sure you'll find things you have in common with them if you give them a chance. Maybe some of them even like that Night Queen series you love so much."

Morgan gave her mother a long, slow eye roll to show just how unlikely that was.

Her mother shrugged. "Hey, you never know. They might just not obsess over it all the time like you and Madison."

"I guess . . ."

Morgan didn't want to talk about Madison. She didn't want to *think* about that traitor. Madison said they'd always be best friends no matter what, but she hadn't responded to Morgan's texts in *weeks*. Morgan's mom said she might just be busy with the beginning of school, but Morgan knew better. If Madison had time to post memes on the Night Queen chat server,

she had time to talk to her “best friend.” But since Morgan didn’t live in Brooklyn anymore, maybe she wasn’t worth the effort now.

“Morgan, I know this move hasn’t been easy for you,” her mom said. “But that’s all the more reason to try your hardest. I promise, once you have some friends, you’ll love this place. You just need to make the effort.”

It was true that Morgan hadn’t tried all that hard to fit in with the girls at her new school, mostly because they seemed dumb and boring. But maybe her mom was right. Maybe she wasn’t giving them a chance.

“Okay, fine. Tomorrow, I’ll try for real.”

If nothing else, maybe she’d stop hearing things.