

Change Of Heart

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Chapter One: Troubled

Vivian Bridges sits in the back seat of the classic Range Rover, accompanying her family on an expedition to south America. She has little choice in the matter as the eighteen-year-old has been expelled from yet another school, and her abysmal record prevents her from being

admitted to even the most desperate of boarding schools. Her mother and father, Gloria and Daniel Bridges, are seasoned archaeologists who specialize in central and south American cultures.

Her younger brother, thirteen-year-old Martin, has opted to join his parents travels willingly. He is cut from the same cloth as his father and mother, unlike Vivian. Vivian glares continuously at the back of her father's head as he drives the old Range Rover, her icy blue eyes burning through his flesh and bone. The rocky ground of the Peruvian hills jostles them about relentlessly. The slender human girl grumbles incoherently as she tries to remain steady in the Rickety vehicle. Her electronic devices have long since run out of battery power, well behind her limited patience.

As Daniel stops the vehicle at a fork to contemplate which trail to take, Vivian runs her hands over her silky, raven black hair with the ends dyed red and pulling the long strands into a high ponytail. Though Martin is quite excited, as are his parents, Vivian is anything but. She only reflects on her personal life and the problems that this trip has caused it, missing her various boyfriends and her inner circle of friends. Had she not lost time from another expulsion, she would have graduated and been on her merry way, but her proclivities keep derailing her plans.

The family arrives at the dig site just as night falls. Only a portion had been opened to the team; much of the land and the surrounding hills and caves are off limits. The

locals fear the wrath of the ancient deities if they allow the archaeologists to desecrate their sacred places with their presence. Parking the vehicle, Daniel and Gloria leap from the truck with considerable vigor, eager to find their associates and learn of their discoveries, however limited.

Martin takes a moment to stretch while Vivian sulks as she stands beside the old truck. With darkness looming, the siblings would like to rest for the night but don't know where to go. The cheerful Martin looks for his parents whilst Vivian sullenly drags her feet not far behind.

"They haven't granted us entry yet?" Gloria's voice is heard saying as the pair round a corner.

"No. They afraid we steal or break." A man's voice says in broken English and with a heavy accent.

It is the voice of a local guide and translator for the archaeologists. Catching up with her parents, Vivian sees the guide for the first time. She grimaces at the Voeldahn and his canine appearance. The human has always found the animalesque appearance of the Voeldahn to be very unpleasant to the eye, even disliking a relative by marriage solely because she is not a human.

"We don't even want to remove the artifacts, only document what is there. To take anything inside without permission, even for preservation, would be disrespectful." Daniel assures the guide.

The statement is true enough for the Bridges and their associates, though museums tend to find a way to collect their prizes.

"Yes, but they afraid. They don't want the spirits to take vengeance for your presence. Take much time to gain permission." The guide says.

Though frustrated, the couple turn back, conceding to their situation. It would be disrespectful not too. The pair are startled by their teenaged children standing only feet behind them.

"Where did you come from?" Daniel chuckles.

"From mom..." Vivian dryly retorts.

"Ahem..." Daniel clears his throat.

"As quiet as church mice, just like we would be." Gloria quickly comments, looking toward their guide.

They lead their children to the edge of the camp and near a fresh dig site where a tent has been set up for the family. Vivian is horrified by the prospect of sharing a living space with her family.

"This can't be happening. I'm having a nightmare and I'm going to wake up any second." Vivian murmurs as she drops her brown M1936 style musette bag beside her cot.

"You have nothing to complain about!" Gloria snaps.

"You should consider yourself lucky that we managed to keep you out of prison after what you did." Daniel adds.

"At least prisoners have climate control." Vivian jokes.

"This is serious!" Daniel barks.

"So am I." Vivian retorts.

"Why can't you be more like your brother?" Gloria asks her daughter.

"You mean a spineless little sh-"

"Hey! Watch it, young lady!" Daniel growls.

Martin stares down at his feet, a sullen expression upon his face. Vivian can't help but smirk as she takes a seat, quickly stretching out on her cot. She could care less about their feelings, regardless of their kinship.

"You're already on thin ice and if you pull any stunts down here, we might not be able to protect you." Daniel explains.

"Whatever..." Vivian grumbles.

"Speaking of, this dig is closed and there are certain areas that you CANNOT be caught in. They WILL arrest you and the locals might do worse than that." Gloria begins.

While Martin listens eagerly, Vivian pays little attention. Her mother describes the perimeter of the camp where they may roam, while forbidding them from anywhere else.

Without bothering to change clothes, Vivian relaxes and closes her eyes. Her exhaustion overwhelms her and her next realization is awakening to the singing of the local diggers and the sounds of shovels and picks striking the earth. Bolting upright, she glances around at the tent, void of all life except for herself.

Rising from her cot, the teenager hastily swaps her clothes and leaves the tent, her stomach growling loudly. She finds her brother, Martin, as he sits at an old folding table underneath a simple canopy tent that contains the field kitchen. Realizing that he has forgotten something, Martin rises from the table and darts toward several pots containing cooked food. Beside the pots are various utensils and drink cups. When his back is turned, Vivian steals the tray and sneaks away.

"What the?!" Martin exclaims as he turns back around.

Vivian silently chuckles as she picks at the food on Martin's tray, eating cooked lamb, kernels of corn and a dense and tasteless form of bread.

"Disgusting. I need real food, fit for humans." She thinks aloud.

"What it matter, if you lose hunger?" A voice asks.

Spinning around, she stands before the guide who sits behind a large rock.

"What are you doing here?" Vivian demands.

"Resting." He answers honestly. "Be grateful. Many don't eat so well in my village."

"Considering the quality, I don't blame them." She snickers.

The canine man is appalled by her callousness.

"I'm not hungry anymore anyway. Do you want it? Dogs need to eat too." She says with a sinister grin.

The guide slowly balls a fist, his anger building. The fur on his arms bristles slightly and he clenches his teeth but doesn't respond.

"No? Oh well. You try to be nice to some people." She mockingly sighs.

Without hesitating, she tosses the tray aside, throwing the food on the ground near a set of standing stones. The guide's eyes grow wide, his toothy maw hanging open in shock. She has just thrown her stolen food on what appears to be a grave site marked by his ancestors, part of the reason the digs are so heavily regulated. He cannot find the words to speak as Vivian casually walks away, mockingly waving her fingertips as she turns.

Chapter Two: Dark Heart

Entering the family tent, Vivian steals several energy bars from her father's pack, among other things that peak her interest. She spends the day wandering about the outskirts of the camp, looking at few and talking to none. As twilight approaches, she overhears her parents and several of their colleagues as they discuss a site of particular interest; a cave system with a small temple carved into it. The site is said to house their god, Viracocha, the creator of all.

The team assumes that means an idol sits within. Desperate to document the find and preserve it, they discuss how they might gain access; perhaps they may bribe the locals into allowing them entry, if even to photograph the site. Vivian listens as they talk, realizing that she had passed the cave in question several times today. She quietly returns to the family's tent and enters. To her frustration, Martin sits inside and reads a book.

Taking a few energy bars, a bottle of water, a small flashlight and her pack itself, she leaves the remaining items behind on her cot. Martin can't help but notice, closing his book and sitting upright.

"What are you doing?" He asks.

"Shut up and mind your own business." Vivian casually replies.

Martin glances down, briefly obeying her. He closes the book as he swings his legs over the edge, facing his sister as he stands from the cot. Slinging her pack over her shoulders, she rushes out of the tent. Martin hesitates to follow her but has a terrible feeling about what may occur if he does not. He peeks outside, his face jutting from between the tent flaps. Martin grows increasingly concerned as he witnesses his sister vanishing behind a boulder and heading for the edge of camp and toward the forbidden zone.

He races outside to follow her, desperate to keep up and watch the troublesome girl. To his horror, she heads directly toward a cave that his parents had been instructed never to enter under any circumstances. He darts toward Vivian and grabs her wrist.

"Wait!" He loudly exclaims.

"Shut up, you idiot. Do you want to get us caught?" Vivian snarls.

"You can't go in there. It's off limits. Please just come back to the tent." He pleads.

"And miss out on the action? Only losers follow the rules." She chuckles. "Besides, if I can sneak that idol out of there..."

"Vivian, please!"

Yanking her arm away from his grasp, she spins around and smacks his hard across the face before shoving chest and forcing him down to the cold ground.

"Get off of me! If you try to stop me, I'll pull the plug on you too." She warns, glaring down at him with fiery eyes.

Turning back, she enters the cave and promptly disappears into the darkness. Martin scrambles to his feet and races back to the camp, ignoring her warning completely. He can't allow her to get away with this, for her sake. Inside the cave, Vivian turns retrieves and turns on her little flashlight. She finds walls of intricately carved stone with decorations depicting various rituals. She is surprised that primitive peoples could be so creative, always imagining them as merely eating, sleeping, killing and procreating.

Walking deeper into the temple, she finds a room that looks starkly different from the others. With her flashlight illuminating her path, she slowly creeps inside. The air is humid but cold and with a musty smell, like the floor were made of compacted soil. Inside the room is a port cut into the ceiling which allows light to enter, but also rain, snow and earthly debris. In the past it was most likely tended by priests, but that day has long since passed.

The beam of dim light shines down on a small figurine that still glistens. Copper, bronze and silver would have long since tarnished, leaving it dull and unreflective; this

object is made of gold. Approaching the idol, it appears as a man seated on a throne, wearing an elaborate headdress and looking quite benevolent.

"I feel like I should have brought a bag of sand with me." She chuckles, thinking aloud.

She reaches out her hand but hesitates, taking a moment to look around the room one last time. Her greed getting the better of her, Vivian swipes the golden statuette. For its size, it is quite heavy in her hand.

"Who dares disturb me?!" A sepulchral voice echoes.

Terrified, Vivian spins around but sees no one.

"Who the hell is that?!" She asks, turning back to the pedestal that once bore the golden idol.

"I'm in your hand, girl." The voice says.

Looking down, the idol glows brightly. The rushing of feet doesn't distract Vivian from the sight as her parents, brother, and a group of angry and armed villagers storm into the room. They stop and stare in shock from the vibrant glow of the idol, the villagers dropping their arms and bowing down before it.

"Who are you?!" Vivian meekly demands.

"Your prize, am I not? You, so young and yet so corrupted. You should be ashamed of yourself." The glowing idol scolds her.

Vivian's heart grows cold as the being takes on a decidedly parental tone, her fear melting away and replaced by a surge of arrogance.

"You dare enter this sacred place and attempt to steal me from my people?!" Viracocha continues.

"I'm sorry. Can I go now?" Vivian asks with a frustrated sigh.

"GO?! You do not realize the severity of your actions. You, who lies and cheats the way others breathe air. You, who steals even from your own flesh and blood. You, who would steal a god from his flock, and you, who once turned off machines that kept alive one of your own relatives." Viracocha continues.

"H-how do you know about that?" Vivian stammers.

"If not for your brother's intervention, you would have blood on your hands. This cannot stand! You must be punished for your transgressions against myself, my people, and all of those whom you've harmed!" Viracocha's voice booms.

The light glows brighter, burning the eyes of all who dare look upon it. It suddenly focuses and shoots like a

laser from the face of the idol in Vivian's hand, striking her body. Dropping the statuette to the ground, the girl screams in pain, to the horror of all who watch. The light illuminates and then envelopes her as her voice changes, growing deeper and more hoarse. The parents weep for their daughter, whose cries of anguish flood their ears. The villagers shield their eyes but continue to peek whenever they can. They stare in awe with mouths agape as they witness the figure within the dimming light.

"You will live to learn from your mistakes..." Viracocha says.

Chapter Three: Penance

The light fades and Vivian slowly comes into view. The golden idle lies on the ground beside her hand. She gasps at the mere sight of her appendage. With claws sprung from her fingernails and a dense but smooth coat of tawny fur covering the flesh of her hand and arm, she jumps to her feet. Looking down at the rest of her body brings only abject terror. Her clothes, which once clung tightly to her slender and feminine body, have torn at the sides and shoulders.

Her chest, now absent of breasts, is both toned and masculine. Her slender legs are muscled and thick, having

torn at the sides of her pants during the change. Her feet have become digitigrade and no longer fit her shoes, which have split from the girth of her paws within. Her face bears a short, feline snout and pointy ears crown her head near the rear. A tail hangs limply behind Vivian's body. Her entire skeletal structure feels altogether different, as her body is now no longer human, and also no longer female. She has changed into a male Voeldahn with the appearance of a puma.

Turning her head toward the flabbergasted audience, Vivian's long black hair with dyed red ends swishes through the air. Amber eyes stare, wide with disbelief at the gawking crowd.

"Do you not like the changes I've made?" Viracocha chuckles.

"What have you done to me?!" Vivian growls, picking up the statuette and clutching it tightly with both hands.

"You use men like they were playthings and you have a great dislike of the Voeldahn. To help you learn the error of your ways, I have made you both. What do you think?" Viracocha asks.

"Change me back, right now!" Vivian barks with her masculine voice.

"Or what? Do you think that you could ever possibly harm me? Do you think that I exist within the idol? I could have easily destroyed you, but life is precious and I want you to learn this truth." Viracocha calmly explains.

"As a Voeldahn man?!" Vivian croaks.

**"Yes. I enjoy the irony of it. You may go now."
Viracocha says.**

The light completely dissipates, and no matter how long Vivian cries and yells at the idol, the voice of the deity has gone. Her family and the villagers stand dumbstruck, taking a moment to collect themselves. It's some time before the guide approaches the formerly human woman, now Voeldahn man, standing beside Vivian who softly weeps on the filthy floor of the temple.

"We should go back to camp. Find you new clothes." He speaks softly.

"Aren't you going to laugh or gloat?" Vivian sniffles.

"No. We go now." The guide says, extending a hand.

After a brief pause, Vivian takes hold of the guides hand. He promptly pulls the man up from the floor before taking hold of the idol, brushing it off and gently placing it carefully upon its pedestal. With Viracocha's image returned to its rightful place, the guide leads the group outside. No one speaks as they depart the temple. The band silently walks toward Vivian's family's tent where the villagers leave them.

**"I guess we're going to need to come up with a story."
Daniel thinks aloud.**

"And a new name for Vivian." Martin remarks.

Vivian glares at her brother but as she points her masculine, clawed finger at him, she immediately pauses; Martin is only speaking the truth. Perhaps from the drain of the change or the shock of the events, Vivian lies back and almost immediately passes out from exhaustion. After a dreamless sleep, Vivian's eyes open to a surprising sight. The guide and several villagers, including the shaman, sit with the family inside the tent, waiting for Vivian to awaken.

"What's going on here?" Vivian asks whilst sitting up.

"Hey Rick." Martin says with a wave.

"... Rick?" Vivian raises a brow.

"Short for Richard." Gloria remarks.

"I know, I mean why Rick? Stacey is a nice name. Can't you call me that?" Vivian asks.

"That sounds too feminine." Gloria chuckles.

"But it's unisex!" Vivian exclaims.

"I don't know... I feel like I've heard 'Stacey Bridges' in a movie before and he was a villain." Daniel comments.

"Fine... I'll be Rick." Vivian grumbles.

"You handle this rather well." The shaman suddenly speaks.

"I don't really have a choice." Rick sighs.

"True. These clothes should fit you. I have spoken with your family, and the village has agreed to claim that you were lost on a hike; you're presumed dead." The shaman continues.

"Great..." Rick murmurs.

"When we get back home, you'll have to play the role of a cousin by marriage. We took you in after losing Vivian and after your parents were killed in a car crash." Gloria chimes in.

Rick shakes his head, still expecting to awaken from this nightmare at any moment. The shaman suddenly begins to chant, approaching Rick who leans back atop his cot, apprehensive of the Voeldahn man. After a moment of the amusingly bizarre chanting and hand waving, the shaman stops as suddenly as he had begun.

"I have blessed you in the name of Viracocha, who will protect you on your journey home. Go in peace." The shaman says.

"Great, now if you don't mind..." Rick says as he rises from the cot.

"Where are you going?" Gloria asks.

"To the outhouse." Rick answers.

"Do you need help? I can explain how it works for you." Martin teases.

Gloria, Daniel and even the shaman cannot help but chuckle.

"Shut up! I'll figure it out. How hard can it be?" Rick growls.

Martin struggles to contain his laughter whilst Gloria's face flushes in embarrassment. Suddenly realizing the double entendre, Rick shakes his head and sighs, leaving without saying another word. Later that day, the family begins packing their few belongings. Half of the village had witnessed the change, which went a long way to reviving their belief in the old gods and goddesses. With Vivian nowhere to be found and Rick a sudden presence, the other villagers, not present at the transformation, have little recourse but to believe the story.

The colleagues of the senior Bridges, though skeptical, are left with little choice but to concede the possibility that such an event could take place; they don't question Daniel or Gloria, nor do they poke or prod Rick, however much they might want too out of scientific curiosity. The family stays for only several more days, using that time to prepare for the trip home and to draft an appropriately detailed cover story. True to their word, the villagers swear to adopt the fabrication as truth and report the girl missing. Even the colleagues of the senior Bridges don't break character when being questioned by the local mountain rescue.

At that time, they simply pretend that Rick is another villager, though he is rarely seen outside of the tent from both embarrassment and fear. He doesn't appreciate the often-amazed stares of the peasant locals. They gawk as if Rick was hired entertainment, especially the younger children who have yet to develop a proper filter. Rick's family is quick to protect the fragile teenager, shooing away the exceptionally nosy.

As the search for Vivian commences, several of the villagers with less than reputable associates agree to help forge legal documents to allow Rick access to the United States. Though it costs the family a considerable sum to purchase the forged paperwork, none of them mention this to Rick; regardless of the transformation they would never leave their child behind. When the day finally comes to return home, Rick is paralyzed with a wave of emotions. Fear, anger, excitement, relief and sorrow all vie for power within him.

The journey home was even more arduous than their arrival; a long drive to a man holding the forged paperwork for Rick, and a long flight to the United States. Many hours later the family returns to their suburban home. Martin escorts Rick to his room, once inhabited by a young human woman. Upon seeing the lavender walls and silver carpet, her well-made bed and its girly pink and white comfort, Rick can't help but weep. Martin feels terrible for his sister-turned-brother at the invisible hand of the angered god.

Rick drops his pack and sits down on the ground, staring at the foot of the bed as tears stream from his amber eyes, down his cheeks and around the sides of his snout. He pulls his legs toward his chest, resting his chin atop his knees as he sits upright in a fetal position. Martin sits beside the softly sobbing Rick, nervously reaching a hand out and resting it on the Voeldahn's shoulder. Rick takes hold of Martin and pulls him in. Sitting on the floor, Rick embraces his brother, crying loudly and trembling like a leaf in the wind.

"I don't know if I can do this... Maybe it would be better if... If I-"

"Don't talk like that vi... Rick. You're the strongest and most willful person I know. If anyone can make it through something like this it's you." Martin swiftly interrupts.

"I've been so cruel to you, and yet you're still here for me... I don't deserve you." Rick meekly replies.

"Probably, but we're stuck with each other." Martin teases.

Rick chuckles before wiping his eyes and sniffing.

"Don't worry. We'll get this sorted out. Who knows, you might be even more popular as Rick." He adds.

After sitting in silence on the floor for a moment, Martin takes his leave to go to bed. Though tired, Rick simply can't relax in the lavender room. The memories it bore witness to are much too painful. That aside, the color is suddenly distasteful to him and he can't feel at ease. Rick exits the room and makes his bed on the living room sofa, opting to sleep there on his first night home.

Chapter Four: Adaptation

Waking up early the next morning, Rick is surprised to find that Gloria is already awake. She sits in the kitchen, her arm barely in view from Rick's position on the couch.

"Oh, good morning!" Gloria happily greets him as he steps inside.

"Hi." Rick smiles, his tail swaying gently from side to side.

Gloria promptly begins cook for him, to Rick's embarrassment, fixing a plate of bacon and scrambled eggs, exactly what Vivian would have asked for.

"As soon as you're done we can go." She comments.

"Go where?" Rick asks apprehensively.

"To buy you new clothes. I have a feeling that your old ones won't fit." She answers with a little grin.

"Right. I don't think they'd look as good on me anyway." Rick softly chuckles.

After breakfast the duo leave the home and head for a nearby store, leaving Daniel and Martin to their own devices. As they browse the men's department, Gloria notices the sorrow in Rick's eyes; his slumped shoulders, low hanging

tail and sullen expression are hardly subdued. Though Gloria tries to put a positive spin on the situation, Rick doesn't appear to be listening, his mind one million miles away. She ponders what to do for a moment.

Quickly returning to several psychology classes that she'd taken in college before changing her major to archaeology, she does her best to cheer up Rick.

"How about these?" She asks as she holds up a pair of slacks, knowing full-well that Rick will dislike them.

"Seriously? Life's hard enough for me already." Rick snickers.

"What's wrong with them?" Gloria feigns ignorance.

Rick shakes his head and sighs before stepping past his mother. Approaching a table of much more fashionable cargo pants, Rick sifts through the stack and picks out a pair in urban camouflage.

"Then I suppose these won't work either." She remarks, holding up a plain button up shirt.

Rick immediately begins looking for more appropriate tops, taking a genuine interest in his appearance. After spending just over an hour buying an entire wardrobe for Rick, he expresses a desire to return home. Gloria looks at her wrist watch.

"Uh... Well... There's still so much to do!" She exclaims.

"Like what?" Rick raises a brow.

"You don't want to be one of those guys, do you?" She asks, brushing the long black hair from Rick's face.

"What's wrong with long hair?" Rick asks, a hint of worry in his voice.

"Oh, nothing." Gloria retorts, glancing away.

Rick turns and looks at a support beam a few meters away, covered with mirrored plates. Approaching the pillar, he looks at himself in the mirror and brushes a hand over his long hair.

"Y-you don't think it looks good anymore?" He asks, looking to Gloria.

"What I think isn't really important, is it?" She casually retorts.

"Seriously..." Rick murmurs.

With a little smile, Gloria rests a hand on her son's shoulder and motions with her head to the salon within the store. After first purchasing the new clothes, they head for the salon. There appear to be no customers inside as a (rabbit Voeldahn) woman leans against the counter and reads a magazine. The young hairdresser turns to the pair, commenting on how beautiful Rick's long hair is. Rick,

however, is unconvinced as his mother had already planted the seeds of doubt.

Undeterred from a haircut, he looks through a magazine of possible styles, choosing one that he had seen some other boys wearing. The hairdresser spins the chair and begins her work, fashioning his hair with short sides but long bangs that can be brushed just over the brow and at an angle. Keeping a touch of Vivian's flare, Rick has the stylist dye red into the front portion of her bangs. Gloria, the hairdresser and even Rick take a liking to his new look. Though the visit added time to their outing, Gloria seems worried as they leave the salon.

"Let's grab lunch while we're out." She suggests.

Event after event, she makes a point to keep Rick occupied for much of the day, though he repeatedly asks to go home after each. When 6 pm draws near, their usual dinner time, Gloria finally relents. They have stayed away for nearly nine hours. She drives her and Rick back home and Rick immediately notices a strange smell as he enters the door. setting down the bags of clothes, Rick heads upstairs to find his old room entirely repainted with Daniel and Martin sitting on the floor and assembling a new IKEA dresser.

"What's going on here?" Rick asks, startling the father and son as they sit in the freshly painted, red bedroom.

"Oh, well uh... we thought you could use a change of scenery." Daniel remarks.

"We heard you go downstairs to the living room last night and thought you'd like your room better this way." Martin adds.

Rick is touched by their genuine concern and the effort they put into comforting him. reflecting on how he had often treated them as Vivian, he feels underserving of their compassion.

"Red always was my color." Rick chokes out, sitting between his father and brother.

"We've noticed." Martin comments, pointing that the red hair dye.

"Changing more than just the scenery, I see." Daniel remarks.

Rick happily helps them build the new dresser. They don't bother allowing the paint time to dry before they remove the protective plastic from atop the carpet. After building and arranging the new furniture, keeping them an inch away from the damp walls, Rick finally feels comfortable in the room. As he folds his new clothes and neatly packs them away in the dresser he hears Gloria calling up from downstairs.

"Dinner!"

Rick has been feeling the energy drain; it had been some time since lunch. Racing downstairs, he witnesses Daniel paying a pizza delivery man, a feline Voeldahn with dark gray fur and dyed purple stripes who looks oddly familiar. Joining the family in the dining room, Rick sits between Martin and Gloria.

"So, do you have your story ready?" Daniel asks.

Rick pauses mid-bite.

"... For what?"

"We're enrolling you back into your school tomorrow." Gloria adds.

"... We are?" Rick squeaks.

"Of course. you need to finish that last year, don't you?" Far be it from us to deny you that." Danie says.

Rick's heart sinks but he doesn't say anything to his parents. As frightened as he is, he feels he has little choice in the matter and has lost the desire to fight. Glancing over to Martin, he is calmed by an assuring smile. The teenage Voeldahn will merely have to try his best to cope with returning to school where he knows everyone and was once known by them. After dinner, Rick's worry keeps him awake. It's almost as bad as the first night after the change.

True to their word, the family drive's Martin to school before taking Rick to JFK High where he formerly attended his second year of the 12th grade as Vivian. He glances around nervously as they enter the building and approach the office.

"Hello. I'd like to enroll my s... Nephew into school." Gloria begins.

"Fill out these forms please." Secretary Davis says as she hands over a pen, clipboard and several affixed papers.

"Excited about the new school?" Ms. Davis asks, trying to make conversation with the teenage boy.

"Oh yeah... Thrilled..." Rick sarcastically murmurs.

"I'm sure you'll fit in right away." Ms. Davis assures him.

Chapter Five: Revelations

Rick sits pensively as Gloria fills out the paperwork, eventually returning it to Ms. Davis at the front desk. Setting the papers aside, Ms. Davis continues her previous work while Gloria embraces Rick, holding him tightly. Leaving the boy behind, she returns to the parking lot while an office aide shows Rick to his first class. He grows nervous as he walks through the familiar halls, worried about how he'll react to the sight of Vivian's friends. The aide mistakes the boy's nervousness for the intimidation of a new environment.

Entering a classroom, the teacher makes a brief introduction; word has since spread of Vivian's disappearance, Daniel having called several days earlier to inform the school. Students glance to the boy, the cousin of their missing peer. The teacher then sends him to a desk with a vacant chair. As Rick passes by students he recognizes, he spots a dark skinned human female named Tina. Her long hair with black and cobalt blue braids matches the dark blue contacts she likes to wear.

She glares at the Voeldahn with obvious disdain, sharing Vivian's distaste for the race. The girl beside her, Sarah, is a tanned human with big brown eyes and shoulder length brown hair pulled into a high ponytail. Sitting at the seat, he glances over to Sarah, who eyes him with a subdued smile, biting her bottom lip. Rick quietly clears his throat and waves politely at Sarah as he grows increasingly nervous. Sarah appears to be immediately infatuated by the Voeldahn, a surprise to Rick who, while still Vivian, thought that Sarah also disliked the race as a whole.

He quietly blends in with the class until the period ends. As soon as the bell rings, he rises from his seat only to be ambushed by Sarah who promptly abandons Tina.

"H-hi..." She murmurs, glancing down to her feet as she speaks and clutching her books tightly to her chest.

"Hey there."

“D-do you need someone to show you around?” Sarah nervously asks.

“Uh... Sure.” Rick answers.

He is taken back by her behavior, having never seen Sarah behaving this way, even with boys she liked. Elated by his response, she leads him down the halls toward the next class. In her nervousness, Sarah takes a wrong turn. Rick promptly corrects the mistake, to Sarah’s surprise.

“Have you been here before?” She asks with a raised brow.

“Oh, uh... No. Just a lucky guess.” He replies.

“Oh... So... You’re Vivian’s cousin?” Sarah asks, trying to hold a conversation.

“Yeah.”

“She never mentioned you before.” Sarah remarks.

“She probably wouldn’t have. She never liked me.” Rick sighs.

“Yeah, she was a total bigot. She wasn’t really a good person in general.” Sarah blurts out.

“Really?” Rick turns to her.

“Yeah. I know it’s not right to talk about people who aren’t with us anymore, but she was a mean, heartless sociopath. I’m kind of glad that she’s gone.” Sarah confides.

“Seriously?!”

Sarah looks horrified, fearing that she might be blowing her chances with the attractive boy.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. Did you like her?” Sarah asks.

“Well, she was still family.” He replies.

“You’re a bigger man than most. I know she was family, but I also know that didn’t mean anything to Viv. You know she tried to kill her great uncle once. Pulled the plug on his life support when she was fourteen. She loved bragging about it like she had it all planned out. I never told her but Tina and I only ever hung out with her because we were scared of her and she liked being around us.” Sarah says.

Rick glances sullenly at the floor as he walks beside a girl who, as Vivian, he had considered a very close friend. Sarah grows silent, worrying that she has struck a nerve.

“I’m sorry. I should have been more considerate. She *was* still your family.” Sarah murmurs.

“It’s alright... It’s just... Difficult for me right now.” He says with a sigh.

“Well, if you need someone to talk too, I could... Uhm...”

“Thanks.” He mutters.

“S-so will I see you around?” She nervously asks.

“Sure.” He says with a smile.

Parting ways at the door as Sarah has another class, Rick finds a chair and sits quietly. He waits for the day to end, glancing over to the clock as he works on his papers. Several students quietly ask him how he is handling Vivian's disappearance or living in the house with her immediate family. Rick struggles to find appropriate answers, often having to stop himself from answering the students by name, whom he isn't supposed to know. To Rick's surprise he finds that the students are far more interested in the new face than the potentially grave fate of Vivian; no one really seems to care that Vivian is gone.

Waiting outside, Gloria is late to pick up Rick from school. Sarah finds him outside and promptly abandons Tina yet again, rushing up to the boy.

"Hey!" She exclaims.

"Hi."

"Waiting for a ride?" She asks.

"Yeah. Mo... My aunt is late." Rick replies.

"We could always walk. You aunt's house isn't that far. Maybe just over a mile." Sarah suggests.

"We should stop by the middle-school and pick up Martin too."

"Okay." She smiles.

They walk together toward the middle-school, which is only a few blocks away in the opposite direction. Sarah

barrages him with questions, curious about his likes and dislikes.

“Wow.” She chuckles.

“What?”

“You’re a lot like Viv.” She remarks.

“You don’t say.” He murmurs.

“A lot nicer though.” She says softly.

They stop as Rick squints his eyes, noticing something amiss. Though the school is out, several students hang around the corner just beyond school grounds. Rick and Sarah witness Martin being picked on and abused by three larger students. They shove the young boy against a chain-link fence as they call him harsh names. Rick stands frozen, seeing the fear in his brother’s face. His heart breaks at the realization that this was effectively how he had treated his brother for most of his life. Even at school Martin had no respite.

One boy strikes him in the face, dropping Martin to the ground. Racing ahead, Rick’s anger gets the better of him. Without warning, the stronger and larger eighteen-year-old violently shoves the bully to the ground, skinning his knee and elbow as he grinds against the concrete sidewalk.

“Ow!” The bully leader cries out.

“What do you think you are doing?!” Rick roars.

“What’s it to you, mister?” Another boy asks.

“That’s my...” Rick hesitates, glancing to the fallen Martin.

“Cousin.” Martin silently mouths.

“Cousin!” Rick finishes.

“Well he had this coming.” A third boy chirps.

“Oh really?”

Rick grabs the boy by the shirt collar. He rips the garment as he drags the boy closer, bearing his teeth as he glares at the now terrified boy who urinates on himself.

“Do you want to know what you have coming?” Rick asks calmly.

“L-let’s go. He’s not worth it.” A nervous bully exclaims, helping his leader from the ground.

“Good idea.” Rick says as he shoves the third boy away.

He stumbles back and nearly falls but is caught by his friends. The three dart away as Rick pulls Martin up from the ground, brushing him off.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah...” Martin nods. “Thanks.”

Rick drapes an arm over his brother as he leads them home, stopping first at Sarah's house which is a short distance from their own. Saying goodbye to the girl, the duo continues home.

"Hey, Rick..." Martin says, breaking the silence.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for sticking up for me. I appreciate it."

"Don't worry about it." Rick says with a grin.

"Vivian never would have done that for me." Martin remarks.

"Yeah, well... Vivian isn't here anymore." Rick murmurs.

Martin glances over to Rick, noting the sorrowful expression in his eyes. The adjustment won't be easy, but from his action, Rick already seems vastly different from the mean-spirited girl that used to be his sister. Though Martin pities him for what he is forced to endure, he can't honestly say that he doesn't appreciate the difference it has made. Hopefully, Rick will learn as Viracocha had hoped, and maybe then he'll also find peace.

Chapter Six: Change Of Heart

Time passes by and Rick soon settles into his role. He swiftly befriends Sarah, whom he often spends his spare time with. She has become his closest friend and confidant. Rick was initially surprised by how sensitive and caring that she actually is, having never seen that side of her as Vivian. He finds it endearing. Though he also befriends several other boys at the school, he actively attempts to avoid the men that he had dated before Viracocha transformed him. The students and faculty soon forget about Vivian altogether and the family declares her legally dead.

Rick discovers that as a moral, friendly and soft-spoken student he garners respect and appreciation from nearly everyone. As he rebuilds his life, he can't understand why he ever associated with some of the friends that he did when he was Vivian or acted so cruel and selfish. One day Rick walks home from school with Martin and his friends Steve and Sarah.

"So, Rick... Do you think you'd want to volunteer with me?" Sarah suddenly asks.

"Volunteer what?" Rick asks in surprise.

"I saw a flier for the Red Cross. I was thinking of volunteering, and I thought you might want to go with me." She softly replies.

Rick glances over to Martin and Steve. While Martin shrugs his shoulders, Steve silently teases him by mockingly blowing a kiss as he stands just behind Sarah.

“Uh... I don’t know, I... I don’t know what I could do.” Rick replies, nervously scratching the back of his head with his claws.

“Well I’m sure they can think of something for us to do. I thought it would just be something nice to do... You know... Together.” She stammers.

“Alright. Why not!” He exclaims.

When the weekend arrives, Sarah and Rick head for the local office to volunteer their time, quickly being put to work with the annual blood drive. They start by working at a booth to promote the drive, returning the following day to work the front desk of the office. Rick can’t help noticing the care and compassion shown by many of the other volunteers. He listens to the stories shared between the donors and the volunteer nurses, who set up their kits in the auditorium. Rick looks over to a young boy who sits beside his mother on a padded bench. The nervous looking child sways his feet and looks toward the donor area.

“Don’t worry. Your daddy will be out soon.” Sarah says to the boy.

“I know. I just hope he can get his blood out to take it to my brother at the hospital before he dies.” The boy replies.

“They have more at the hospital, sweetheart.” The boy’s mothers says softly, draping an arm over him.

“Oh. Did they give Mike that blood?” The boy asks.

“Yes, baby. They’re taking care of him.” The mom says.

“Good. I don’t want Mike to die.” The boy remarks.

The little boy hugs his mom tightly, who stares past him and at the floor. Though she comforts her young son, her mind must be on her eldest. Her eyes turn glossy with tears as she pets her sons head.

“I don’t either, baby.” She murmurs.

Their behavior and dialogue deeply effects Rick, his heart stinging as he imagines their anguish. After that weekend, he spends considerable time deep in his own thoughts. As he sits with his family at dinner, he stares at his untouched plate. He can’t stop thinking about the little boy and his mother at the Red Cross office. Their pained expressions and sorrowful eyes haunt his thoughts and his dreams. All he wants to do is somehow take away their suffering, and the suffering of others like them.

“Are you alright? You aren’t eating.” Daniel says.

“Yeah...” Rick murmurs.

“So how did volunteering go?” Gloria asks.

“I think I know what I want to do with my life.” Rick says, turning to his parents.

“What’s that?” Daniel asks.

“I think I should practice medicine.” Rick answers.

The family stares with wide eyes. They knew the change would have some effects, but they never realized that they would be so dramatic. Rick is completely serious as he stares back at them. The parents can hardly believe what they hear as he continues speaking.

“If I became a doctor or some kind of technician, I could help others. I could volunteer at a free clinic, join the peace corps, or maybe work with the Red Cross. I just... I want to do something to help ease people’s suffering.” Rick’s eyes begin to water.

“Well that’s wonderful!” Gloria exclaims.

“Indeed. I really don’t know what to say.” Daniel admits.

“Does that mean I can call you ‘Doc’?” Martin asks.

“Sure.” Rick chuckles.

The parents look between each other. They don’t speak in words but share their thoughts with glances. They would be lying if they thought that the transformation hadn’t done their child tremendous good. Vivian never would have done anything of the sort. Clearly Viracocha’s lesson has achieved the intended purpose, and the pair wonder if Rick might somehow change back. They both shudder at the thought of their rebellious, selfish and conniving daughter returning to them.

“When do you plan on going to college?” Daniel asks.

“As soon as I graduate.” Rick answers.

“Valedictorian, of course.” Daniel chuckles.

“Well, you have our full support.” Gloria grins cheek to cheek.

“Thanks.” Rick smiles back. “I couldn’t have made it at all without all of you.” He admits.

Chapter Seven: The End

True to his word, Rick studies hard and graduates as valedictorian. With a scholarship granted, he begins attending the local state University. Three years pass and his resolve only strengthens. Rick and Sarah continue to remain close friends, though he delves deeper into volunteer work whereas she focuses on her studies. As the time passes, he becomes further ingrained in his work with the American Red Cross; he is a staple of the local office and known to all on a first name basis. As he works late at the office, another volunteer named Devin enters.

“Hey, Rick. How’s it going?” She asks.

“The usual. Juggling exams and our work.” He answers.

“I don’t know how you do it.” She chuckles.

“Very delicately.” He answers with a smirk.

“So, did you hear?”

“Hear what?” He turns to her.

“A hurricane is due to strike the lower half of the state. I heard they’re thinking of sending a team right after to help everyone effected.” She explains.

“Sign me up!” Rick exclaims, rising from his seat.

“I knew you’d say that.” She laughs.

Rick merely shrugs his shoulders. At the local office he is nearly a mascot, the most eager to work and the first to volunteer at all times. Many share Devin’s bewilderment at his ability to continue his medical education with the amount of time that he gives the organization. Only days later, the hurricane strikes as expected. Many impoverished families, unable to leave for one reason or another, are left with ruined homes, limited supplies and some with untreated injuries.

As he said he would, Rick is the first to join the relief effort. No one is surprised. This is the behavior that they have come to expect from their beloved associate. With several years of dedicate work and considerable experience, he is granted control of the team that is sent in; he oversees their efforts and coordinates with other organizations and the local authorities. Regardless of his position and the required administrative tasks, Rick is one of the first to work with the dispossessed masses.

Alice stands in the back of a large truck, unloading cases of bottled water and passing them to several men standing beneath the loading gate. The young twenty-year-old human woman sweats as her muscles burn. Her pale skin glistens as the salty liquid covers her flesh.

“Let me help you.” A man’s voice politely speaks.

“Thanks.” She says, wiping sweat from her brow.

Looking up, she is surprised to see the local director climbing into the back. The handsome Voeldahn with the appearance of a puma walks past her and squats down. He moves case after case from the back of the truck, allowing Alice time to rest. Soon the truck is completely empty and the pair climb from the back. As Rick’s feet strike the ground another volunteer approaches them.

“Hey, Rick!” He calls out.

“What’s up?”

“We have a police lieutenant over here who needs to talk to you. Something about leaving some officers for our security.” The volunteer explains.

Rick quickly darts off to meet with the officer, leaving the bewildered Alice to continue her work with her associates. She had only been a Red Cross volunteer for a few months, but she spent enough time to see him once or twice before. Joining another volunteer named Michele, the two women help distribute the supplies that they’ve brought

for the destitute. While passing out Meals-Ready-To-Eat to the local families, she witnesses Rick visiting several children, carrying a large cardboard box beneath his arm.

He speaks with a single mother for a moment before kneeling down to talk to her frightened child. Reaching into the box he carries he produces a soft teddy bear. Passing the comforting doll to the child, she snatches the bear and holds it close to her chest. After a few comforting words and a pat on the head, Rick moves on. Going from family to family, he treats each child to a similar toy. Alice can't help but grin at the heartwarming sight. Later in the day, she takes a break and heads for a trailer set aside for the other volunteers. As she walks past the supply tent, she overhears a conversation.

"What's the big deal, man?" A voice asks.

"The big deal?!" Rick snarls.

Alice stops and turns, looking at the flap of the large tent housing the MREs and bottled water. She steps aside, listening in on the conversation.

"You can't treat these people like that. They've lost everything, and the last thing they need is your attitude!" Rick growls.

"But I caught one of them stealing!" The man retorts.

“Yeah, and we dealt with that. That doesn’t make them all bad people. You can’t blanket judge them for the acts of one person.”

“Fine... I’m sorry.” The man sighs.

Rick recognizes the tone as one he would have used as Vivian when blowing off a scolding or advice. The volunteer’s callousness makes Rick’s heart sting and his blood boil. He grits his teeth and balls a fist.

“Where is your heart? Don’t you feel anything for these people? For their children? Their sleeping in tents, some only feet from their obliterated houses!” Rick says.

“I’m here to do a job.” The man retorts.

“But you’re also here to care!”

“Am I?” The man asks.

“I’m going to make this easy... If you don’t really give a damn about these people, then I don’t want you here. You’re not Red Cross material if your heart pumps ice water.”

“Are you serious?!” The man exclaims in genuine shock.

“Are you questioning me?” Rick barks.

“No...” The man murmurs.

Alice watches on from around the corner of the supply tent as Rick storms outside. Though he looks infuriated, he wipes a tear from one eye as he passes by. Alice remains unnoticed from her hiding place. The event deeply effects the young woman. She continues on to the volunteer’s trailer

and steps through the already open door. Pouring herself coffee and taking a prepackaged sandwich, she takes a seat beside Devin who reads a magazine. Devin had been spending her time distributing medical supplies to the nearest functioning hospital.

Alice takes a bite of her sandwich, glancing over to Devin as she turns the page of her magazine. As she takes a sip of her coffee, wondering what to say, Devin suddenly turns to her.

“So how are you liking the work so far?” Devin asks, setting down her magazine.

“It’s great. It’s challenging but rewarding.” Alice answers.

“Are you making friends?”

“Some... I...” Alice hesitates. “There’s a few people I like.”

“Anyone in particular?” Devin asks with a little grin.

“Rick is nice.” Alice sheepishly answers.

“He is.” Devin nods.

“He’s the most dedicated, compassionate man I have seen. He’s so sweet and kind hearted... He’s...” She pauses.

“Well now...” Devin giggles. “Paying attention, are we?”

“How could I not? He’s so unlike every other man I’ve met. I honestly didn’t know that men like him were born.” Alice gushes.

"We're not born." Rick says, startling the two women whom he stands behind.

They turn in their chairs to face him, Alice flushing at the mere sight of the Voeldahn. She gazes up at him, her face red and a wide smile forming on her face.

"We're made." He adds, smiling back.