

WHAT VERITY KNEW

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“O-G-R-E” I re-type.

Tanner changed the autocorrect on my phone to spell “ogre” as “B-O-O-G-E-R” like a year ago. I need to change it back.

More than that, I can’t wait to change my last name from “Ogre.” I mean, it’s something my parents should have done 15 years ago when I was born, and they saw that I was ENORMOUS for a preemie. And I had a full head of hair. And my skin was slightly green colored. Yeah. “Patinaed copper.” I guess the only thing worse would have been if they named me Penny. Thank God they didn’t.

I’m Verity. And I’m an ogre. Actually, to be specific, I’m an “ogress.”

My brother Tanner is NOTHING like me—something he and everyone else on the planet reminds me of every second. The gene must have skipped him like it skipped everyone else in my family (except some huge ancient guy in a black and white picture so you can’t even tell what color his skin is). No, Tanner’s normal-brown hair, brown eyes. He even has dimples, in case I needed a reminder that the universe is totally unfair.

He’s a sophomore. And today I’m a freshman. So that should be really fun.

I finish typing my whole name and send the text to my mom. I’m giving her crap for the whole “not changing our name” thing. She’s worried about me on my first day of high school and...so maybe I mention the last name thing again to bother her. Or maybe I want her to feel bad and baby me just a little when I get home. Maybe.

I take a deep breath and step into my first official high school class. Geometry. I can handle this.

“Hi, you’re one of the freshmen in here, right?”

A frighteningly normal-looking girl is smiling an equally frighteningly white smile at me.

I nod.

“I’m Kelsey. You’re Tanner’s sister?” I nod again.

“He and I were in English together last year...Mr. Freidman. Did he...mention that class?”

And it’s begun! The joys of having an insta-popular brother! I’ll be the go-between. Like I’ve always been. I can handle that.

“Um, I’m not—”

But she’s one of those girls who likes to talk over you.

“I love your skin, by the way. It’s beautiful. I’m someone who thinks ‘different’ is beautiful.”

I smile politely and wonder if she thinks my huge teeth are differently beautiful, too. I can see by her tiny wince that she doesn’t.

“Thanks. I’m Verity. And, yeah, I’m pretty sure my brother mentioned you. English, right?”

Her eyes light up, and she squeezes my hand with her tiny fingers.

“Yes! Oh, I’m so glad we’re in this class together!” She turns to the front as the teacher walks in.

I slouch down and breathe a sigh of relief. Ok. That conversation was easy. I listen really well. I should be a shrink.

As I make my way to World History, I think about it a little more seriously. I mean, maybe I should offer up my services. There have been all sorts of traumas at this school. I don’t just mean break-ups at dances, fights at football practice, and that kind of thing. I mean disappearances.

Last year, Jamie Perkins came early for swim practice because he hadn’t been told it was cancelled. Security camera footage showed him going into the school with his swim bag. Two hours later when the gym teacher showed up, a locker was open in the boys’ locker room. Jamie’s bag was flung on the floor. There had obviously been a struggle. His goggles were hanging from one of the sprinklers on the ceiling, and a flip-flop was stuck into the ceiling. He must have kicked it off hard (though the ceilings seem pretty cheap). Anyway, the police came and everything, but they never found any sign of him.

The candle wax from the vigils for Jamie had hardly dried in the quad six months later, when a substitute teacher—I think her name was Ms. Berlin—also disappeared

under mysterious circumstances. She was at school late. The report said she was using the school's wi-fi to do other side work. They tracked her on there until about 8:45. The next morning they found her computer open, her baking blog *Whatchya Knead* half-written, and little pieces of her dress on the floor. No sign of the substitute. A Missing Persons report was filed, and her family came into town and were on TV asking if anyone saw her. But no one had.

Just another disappearance in Wollville. The towns-people are—I wouldn't say used to it—but they don't stop what they're doing over stuff like that anymore.

I don't worry much because of my size. But of course our parents do, so we always have to tell them where we're going to be and when we'll be home.

I make my way to World History and feel a SHOVE.

I spin around. I'm quick for my size.

It's Tanner.

"What's up, freshman?"

"Hey, Tanner."

I take him in. Here at school it's more noticeable that he spent the summer working out. He's been trying to move up a weight class for wrestling, and it looks like he will. Not a problem I have.

I look around and there are a lot of people staring. I don't know how many kids here knew we were siblings. We only moved here last year, and our parents decided to spare me Middle School with home schooling. But people have seen me around town. In the back of the movie theater (where I have to sit), at the pool (hello tidal wave), and at back to school shopping at the mall, where I bought shoes in the men's department.

Obvious—alert to parents: don't move when your daughter's in 8th grade. And an ogress. Duh.

I ignore the stares and decide to needle Tanner. "I met Kelsey. She likes you."

Tanner cringes.

"Oh, no. Did she ask about me?"

"Uh...yeah! That's how I know!"

"Don't tell her about me. She stalked me all last year. She talks CONSTANTLY"

I pretend to care. I'm not sure why, "Well, she was nice to me, so I like her."

“Great,” he turns to go. “I’ll look for you at lunch.”

“I don’t need...,” but I realize how much my voice is booming. And I realize how many people are looking. And I realize that I probably do need someone to sit with.

I head to the cafeteria after Gym and don’t see Tanner. I think maybe he’s in line for lunch.

I first notice the giant ogre serving lunch, because of his size. He’s the first person I’ve ever met since I reached my full height that I had to look up at. And I’ve met NBA players (when my parents took me to “fan days” to make me feel better about being 6’1” in 6th grade). The ogre sees me, too. He looks surprised, like he hadn’t considered there could be others like him. Probably because he doesn’t go online much—he’s older.

I grab a tray and try to blend in. I glance at the other girls. Everybody is slouching and leaning on the buffet. I could never lean on anything. I learned that in second grade when I broke the school jungle gym.

The other girls click away on their phones. Sure, I could do the same. Only I don’t really have anyone but my mom to text. So I spend my time stealing peeks at the cafeteria guy. He seems to have makeup on. But it’s hard to tell since he barely looks up.

“Hey,” Tanner sidles up beside me. “Can we cut?”

He’s brought his best friend Jo-Jo with him.

“Hey, Jo-Jo.”

“Hey, freshman. How’s your first day?”

I like Jo-Jo. He’s used to my size and ogressness and doesn’t care. I often think how awesome it would be to strike a deal and just give him a bunch of my muscle. Because he is a serious pipsqueak. He comes up to my chest, which is, I’m pretty sure, why he never looks me in the eye. Just way too awkward an angle.

It’s my turn, so I ask for a veggie burger. The ogre server locks eyes with me for a second—yellowish eyes that are frankly terrifying. I’m frozen for a moment, but he slings a veggie burger and turns to Tanner.

“Hamburger,” Tanner orders.

I sit with them for lunch. Kelsey comes by and tries to flirt until Tanner gets up and goes back for a second burger. As he walks away, she deflates.

“He’s serious about putting on weight,” I offer, trying to make her feel better. Why? Because it’d be fun to have a friend who’s a girl. A normal, nice, talkative high school girl. It’d just be nice to have a friend.

“Oh, totally. I get it. Wrestling!” She smiles then spots her friends. She turns back to me, “Tomorrow? You sit with us.”

“Ok!”

“Byeeee!”

And she’s off.

Jo-Jo’s looking at me.

“What?” I ask without looking at him.”

“You’re friends with Kelsey?”

“I just met her. She seems nice.”

I turn and watch Tanner coming back with not one but two more burgers.

“That dude’s cool. He gave me two.”

I look at the server again. He’s watching Tanner. I shiver, but I don’t know why.

And then I hear it. The low grumbling. And I know it’s coming from the ogre.

I don’t think human ears can pick up on it. I’ve only ever heard it twotimes. Once, when we were little, our parents took us to the zoo. We had to stand back since the animals seemed to react strangely to me. The monkeys would always scream and scream. The snakes would throw themselves out of whatever tree they were curled up in and race for shelter. And the carnivores—the lions, the bears, those guys—would watch us. Just like the cafeteria worker was watching Tanner. They’d watch and growl at us, and I was the only one who could hear it. Whole crowds walked by, old people, school trips, moms with strollers! They’d all walk by and obviously no one could hear it. But I could. It was a low growling. A growling that they wanted to hunt us. And eat us.

I started bawling, and my mom never took us back to the zoo. I even got excused from field trips.

The other time I heard it was a time I’ve never told anyone about. It was last year I was out walking. I’d sneaked out because my parents didn’t let us out because of the

whole missing student thing. But they didn't realize that I could reach the big oak branch four feet from my window with one hand and then swing down. It was easy. I'm sure I looked like a freakin' gorilla when I did it, but I only did it at night when I needed to think.

That night, I went walking and walking and found myself behind the high school. I didn't go there yet, but I sort of walked up close to it, between the sheds and the track, wandering aimlessly past the football equipment. I noticed a light on, and (like any bored person in the middle of the night) I headed over. I ducked down low (really low) below the window. I could see a teacher in there, or anyway an adult. She worked on a laptop, clicking through pictures of cakes. I thought it was kind of funny, somebody sitting in a dumb classroom with Spanish conjugation on the walls looking at cakes so I hesitated just a minute before leaving. And when I hesitated, she spun around. I ducked. Then I held my breath. Did she see me? I slowly backed up, keeping myself low to the ground and trying not to make any noise. When I was about 10 feet away, I paused. And that's when I heard it. I heard that low growling. I turned to run but slipped on the pebbles. The growling got louder. I jumped to my feet. I looked over my shoulder at the window. The lady wasn't looking at me. She wasn't looking at me at all. She had her arms in front of her face. A shadow stretched over her, and she screamed. I ran. And I didn't stop until I was back in bed, sweating and panting.

So sitting in the cafeteria, watching my brother cram the rest of his second hamburger into his face, I knew what that growling meant. I knew that the towering man in the cafeteria was no man. He was an ogre, like me. And he was going to eat my brother, just like he ate that substitute teacher that night.

After school, I try to come up with a plan. I need to intimidate that ogre, tell him to leave my brother alone. But...I'm scared. I'm strong, but he's taller than me. And older. And a guy...I mean, an ogre. Not an ogress.

I stay up most of the night, trying to figure out a plan. Could I offer him someone else? No. I couldn't do that. Plus, I'm new at school and talk about getting off on the wrong foot.

No.

I almost walk a hole in my carpet pacing around with my next idea: going to the police. On the one hand, maybe that's the way to go. He's probably behind all those unsolved disappearances. Capturing him would be good. People would appreciate that. They'd appreciate me. I let myself think for a while about what that'd feel like to be popular, to be a sort of hero.

But I know that wouldn't be how it'd go. I know that what would really happen is I'd be opening up the whole human-ogre can of worms.

Humans and ogres have a checkered history. It's happened over and over: we're freaked out by each other, then we get to know each other, then we're friends, then either the human gets freaked out again and kills the ogre, or the ogre eats the human. And then we're back at square one.

So the idea of reminding everybody about how ogres eat human flesh didn't seem like the smart way to go. And I want high school to be easy. I want to be friends with humans and ogres. I want to just forget about being different. And telling everybody that the lunch guy was dining on students wasn't the way to do it.

I'd have to face him alone.

The next day, I power through classes, trying to be friendly and outgoing, but all of a sudden high school seems tiny and unimportant. I might be fighting to the death before sunset. That's scary. It makes talking to new people look easy.

In Geometry, I pretend to be taking lots of notes, but Kelsey still corners me on the way out.

"Don't forget! We're eating lunch together!!"

I smile and wonder how I'm going to be able to eat. I'm nervous.

So nervous that I'm shaking my leg under the desk during English, and the whole room starts to shake. A book literally falls off the shelf. I stop and look around along with everyone else like "what was that?" Mrs. Collins winks at me. I try to sink in my chair, but I'm as far down as I can go, meaning I'm still the tallest in the class.

By lunch, I'm officially scared. Out of the corner of my eye I can see the ogre's hulking mass behind the food. My face flushes like I can feel him breathing. I decide to ditch out of line, grab a banana and head to the tables.

"Verity! Verity! Over here!"

I look up, and it's Kelsey. I smile—I'm good at fake smiles, too—and head over. How am I going to be able to make small talk? All I hear is that low grumble. I get up the courage to look over my shoulder and see that my brother's in line. And the ogre is staring at him. Then, out of some sixth sense or something, he looks over at me. I look away. But no, no. I can't. I raise my gaze and look right back at him. We just stare at each other.

"Verity!! Over here!" I turn to Kelsey.

She scoots over—a BIG scoot—and pats the seat next to her. Across from her are twins with short bangs and hair held in weird clips. And they're looking at me like I'm a freak. One of them obviously gets kicked under the table.

"This is Jenna and Jessa," Kelsey explains as I sit carefully at one end of the table. I know balance and tipping like, really well.

"Hi," the twins say in unison.

"Oh my God! You guys totally said that together," Kelsey giggles..

Kelsey's pretty easily amused.

"You weren't at Wollston Middle, huh?" Jenna talks while she's opening her yogurt. She licks the top.

"No. I was homeschooled last year."

"Cause our brother goes there, and he would have mentioned you, Jessa jumps in.

"Yeah, I guess so," I pivot. "It must be awesome being twins."

I smile and they smile and Kelsey launches into some stories about the twins and tricking boys on the phone. And I feel like I could maybe actually fit in. We aren't talking about Tanner, even if that's how I ended up at this table. We're talking about dumb stuff. And I love it. It's great. It's normal. I feel like I'm a regular high school girl with friends and gossip and a life!

But only for a minute. Because then I remember. I have to kill an ogre. Tonight.

After lunch, instead of going to Spanish, I hide out in the bathroom near the west entrance to the school. That's closest bathroom to the cafeteria, and where I figured I'll see the ogre leave.

My heart is beating fast. I can feel it. My hands are sweaty. But I just keep shutting my eyes and picturing Tanner. I even think of him when we were little, and he'd jump on my back even though he was older. By the time I was one I could pick him up with one arm and hoist us out of the crib. We'd escape, and he'd ride on my back down the stairs, sometimes outside, and to the tree in the front yard. He'd always make some noise, and I was afraid we'd get caught, so I'd lift him up to my back again and gallop on all fours back inside and up the stairs. These were our little secrets that our parents never knew about.

And this will be my little secret that not even Tanner will know about.

I hear a heavy metal door slam. I look out the window. It's him. The ogre.

I take a deep breath, open the window, and slip out of the bathroom and onto the grass. I look around, but fifth period is just starting and no one is bored enough yet to be looking out the windows.

I watch the ogre. He lurches when he walks, dragging one foot slightly as he goes. Maybe from an injury? I hope.

I keep my distance as he walks out of the school gate. I don't have any problems walking. Or doing much of anything—except maybe fitting into normal-sized desks. I'm big, but I've always had good balance. I know I'm lucky. I've read in groups online about how awful it is to be a klutzy ogress.

I decide to move. The road has lots of trees on either side, and I think that I can track him and hide as I go.

I make sure he's about thirty yards up the road, and I start to cross. I stop, though. There's some dirty paper towel blowing in the road. I get a closer look—it's covered in makeup. Tons of it. That must be how his weird skin coloring doesn't show up.

I'd usually feel sorry for someone who felt so self-conscious that he had to wear tons of makeup every day. And he's older, too! But this guy isn't a nice guy. This guy wants to eat my brother.

I pick my way up the hillside, and I can see his hulking mass moving slowly down the road. We've twisted and turned for a while now, and we're maybe a mile from school. And that's when he veers sharply off the road.

I lose sight of him. And in the tall trees, everything seems a little darker. I ease my way down from the trees and pause at the road. I look both ways, but I know there's

no one coming. We've crossed over past the edge of town. There's nothing out this way except forest and, further out, a rock quarry where people dump old cars. It isn't even romantic or anything. It's just granite and gray and bleak.

I cross the street quickly and creep slowly up the hill on the other side.

Crack!

A branch snaps beneath me. I hold my breath. Did he hear? Is he waiting for me? Or have I lost his trail?

After a moment with just the whisper of the tree-tops blowing, I move again.

I keep low to the ground, sometimes using my arms to clamber on all fours. My heart is pounding again.

I reach the top of the hill, and from behind thick pines, I see a little shack. My heart jumps, and I consider turning and running.

I could go to the police! I could tell my parents! We could move!

No. I shut my eyes. I need to face him.

I lower myself slowly down the hill. Closer to the little house. As I'm about to step into the yard—

"You're a quiet tracker."

I spin around. He's there. His hulking body is hunched over, a club in his hands. I stagger back, then try to stand firm.

"I'm ... I just want you to stay away from my brother."

"Your brother?" He pretends to think then smiles a terrifying, sharp-toothed smile. He's uglier, scarier with his full gray skin showing.

He steps toward me. "But he looks delicious."

I stagger back again even though I want to stand up and be tough. "Leave him alone! I know it was you who killed the sub. And the swimmer. I know it was you."

"Smart girl." He takes another step toward me.

"Stay away from my—"

But he steps toward me, and I go mute.

"Stay—," I try, but nothing comes out of my mouth, and I stagger back again.

"Maybe I'll start with you. I haven't had ogress. I imagine it's tough and gamy. Looks sort of disgusting, really."

I glance over my shoulder. I could probably out run him and make it home—

“But no. I’ve had my heart set on young Tanner for a long time.”

And when he says the name, when he uses my brother’s, my annoying, ever-present, all-mine brother’s name, I get mad. I feel the rage start to build in me. I stop stepping back.

And the ogre sees, and he narrows his eyes. “No,” I say, and my voice is a growl.

I dive at his feet, sweeping them out from under him. He lands with a thud, but just as fast he flips me around and suddenly towers over me.

“I can kill you first if you prefer.”

I roll out from under him just as his club lands where I was.

I spin around and lower my stance. His eyes flash with anger, and he jumps at me, swinging the club.

I duck, panting. I’m not thinking, just reacting. He swings again. I dive to the ground. Just as he leaps toward me, I throw two fistfuls of dirt and pine needles in his face. He staggers back for just a moment. I kick his club out of his hand, then turn, and run up the hill.

I stop to breathe and think.

Then I continue uphill. I make sure to make lots of noise-grunts and breaking branches. I pause and hear him following.

Now I’m in my element. I slip over heavy trunks like they’re pommel horses and stay yards ahead of him. I can hear him lurching after me.

I see my goal in the distance: the cliff at the edge of the quarry. I make more noise, grunting, panting. And I can hear him laugh between pants.

I come to the edge of the cliff and bend over, huge hands on my knees, breathing hard.

I hear him slow behind me. I hear him snap a thick branch off a tree. I wait.

“You move fast for an ogress. Too bad you took the dead end.”

I stare at the ground and wait. I can smell him now. I just stay hunched over, panting, with all my senses awake.

He’s right behind me now. He’s stopped. Next he will raise the tree trunk and knock me over the cliff. I hear the “whoosh” of the trunk swinging up.

I dive out of the way. The tree trunk crashes into the ground sending dirt, leaves, and rocks flying. I slip behind him and take a deep breath. With all my strength I shove!

He's caught off guard. He manages to spin around, eyes flashing. And that's how I see his face as he realizes he's going over the side of the cliff.

I hear trees crash and crunch as he falls down. But he doesn't make a noise. Not until he hits the bottom with a boom that sounds supersonic. All his breath comes out in a deep, horrible, hellish moan.

I cringe and cover my ears.

Then the moan stops. It's silent. I tremble and realize I'm covered in sweat. I turn and run as fast as I can the whole way home. I don't stop to rest. I don't stop to breathe. I don't stop to wipe the tears that stream down my cheeks.

And when I get home, I sneak inside and never mention what happened. When my parents find me, I take my grounding for cutting class and just let everyone believe I was having a moody teen day.

The cafeteria guy is the last of the disappearances. The police find the remains of a bear at the bottom of the cliff, but that was really the ogre. There are no bears here.

No one knows what I did to save Tanner and the school, but since then, I walk around at my full height—6'8"—with no slouching. Every day, I sit with Kelsey and the twins. They're actually really funny and cool, and it still drives Tanner crazy, so that's a bonus.

I make the basketball team. I'm still veggie, and a new boy who's also veggie just started school. He's 7'0" with a greenish hue to his skin. So I think I might have found someone to ask to homecoming. And if he's smart, he'll say yes.