



Bubbles & Blunders

A Deleted Scene from the Award-Winning Novel, Life After: Huntress

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Romona and I headed towards an unfamiliar structure. My first thought was that it resembled a tennis bubble, being a spherical construction. As I studied it, the shape changed ever so slightly like a globule of water, which added to the ever-changing pearlescent color illusion. A lustrous rainbow floated on it like an iridescent oil spill. It was mesmerizing in a psychedelic sort of way. Romona waited patiently while I studied the orb.

“Wow,” I finally said, “that is really . . . weird.”

“Yes, it’s different isn’t it? Rather beautiful though. Doesn’t look like a bowling alley, does it?”

“That’s for sure. Almost seems a waste.”

“How so?”

I shrugged. “Shouldn’t a structure that interesting house something more important.”

“Bowling’s fun. Don’t knock it until you try it.” She said with a lift of a brow.

“Yeah yeah yeah.” I threw her a skeptical look. I wasn’t as jazzed about this evening’s activities as she was.

“Let’s get inside and give it a try, shall we?”

“Sure, let’s get this over with. I mean, let’s give it a try. Ah,” my eyes roamed the seamless membrane, “where’s the door?”

“Follow me.”

Romona walked right up to the bubble, turned her head to look at me, and then with a wiggle of her eyebrows walked right into it's exterior casing.

“What? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

I had to walk blindly into this thing? Maybe there was a more conspicuous entrance somewhere. I stood contemplating my options when Romona’s disembodied head appeared on my side of the membrane.

“Are you coming in or what?”

“Is there a trick I should know about? Do I have to hit the right spot or anything?”

“Nope! It’s as easy as pie! Just walk into it. Pretend there isn’t a barrier.”

I huffed out a breath of air. “Okay, I’m coming through now. Clear the way.”

“You got it!” Her head disappeared again.

Closing my eyes I took a step forward. It was like walking through a waterfall without getting wet. I felt a cool sensation on the top of my head that flowed around my body all the way down to my toes. I opened my eyes when the feeling went away and was staring at a very dry Romona. I checked to make sure I wasn’t covered in some sort of liquid. I was as dry as well.

“That was trippy,” I said.

“Yeah, I know,” she replied with a smile. “But we’re here!”

My head swiveled to take in the walls and ceiling, which were slightly translucent from the inside. It looked like an oily layer of water was magically suspended above our heads. It undulated like waves. Occasionally lights and loud noises would go off and the ceiling or walls would ripple, changing the shape slightly.

“You made it!” Kaitlin had found us.

I was preoccupied by my surroundings and ignored their conversation.

“Earth to Audrey! Did you hear me?”

“Huh, what?” Kaitlin forced my attention by shouting and waving a hand in front of my face.

“I said we have a couple of lanes this way.” She turned to guide us through the crowd.

“By the way, I invited a couple other people as well.” She said over her shoulder as an afterthought.

“What other people?” I asked distractedly.

She shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal. “Oh just some of my friends.” She turned her head to look down at me. She worried her lip between her teeth. A cold feeling snaked up my spine as a feeling of foreboding grew. “And I ran into Jonathon today and you guys seemed to hit it off well invited him to.”

And there it was. I should have guessed it, but I hadn't. I stopped dead in my tracks. Romona barely missed plowing into us. Kaitlin had the sense to look a touch guilty, conspicuously avoiding my eyes.

Romona tactfully stepped in. “So it's Kevin, Alrik, and Logan as well, right?”

Kaitlin bit her lip and nodded. When I continued to glare she caved to the tension.

“Okay, Audrey, I'm sorry, I should have given you a heads up. Or maybe even not invited him. But I honestly did run into him. I thought getting to know him better might straighten some things out for you.”

I'm so outta here.

I stomped into the crowd leaving both behind. Preoccupied by my internal seething, I slammed into a hard chest.

“Oaff!”

I lost my balance but strong hands immediately steadied me. I was about to jerk away when I recognized the familiar voice.

“You know, we have to stop meeting this way.”

My eyes traveled up to meet Jonathon’s toothy grin. He grasped my bare arms below my shoulders. The empathy link was showing me his excitement.

“Oh, hey, hi.”

He set me back and released my arms. I was happy to have only my own emotions to shift through. He was dressed casually in street clothes. No more princely garbs. He seemed more relatable in his plain navy blue t-shirt and dark wash jeans. I relaxed fractionally.

“Oh good, you guys found each other!” Kaitlin’s voice soured my mood. “Audrey is having second thoughts about bowling tonight though.”

Jonathon glanced at me with concern. “Really, why’s that?”

“Oh, I’m not sure if I’m any good at this. I don’t want to be a dead weight.”

It was the only part of the truth I was willing to admit out loud. I wanted to shoot Kaitlin a scathing look for bringing it up in front of Jonathon, but couldn’t get away with it while he continued to stare at me.

Jonathon’s easy smile returned. “You can’t worry about that. It’s all in good fun. And besides, I hear they have very good blue icee’s and if you’re score doesn’t break the teens I promise there will be one with your name on it.” He then leaned in closer so Kaitlin couldn’t

hear what was said next, “I was planning on treating you to one anyway, but now the worse you are the bigger cone you’ll get.”

I was caught. I couldn’t bow out of this without making a scene.

“I’ll give it a try.”

“Perfect.” He turned his smile on Kaitlin. “Lead away!”

“Great! This way, we’ve already claimed a couple of lanes.”

We followed Kaitlin in a single file line as we snaked through the thick crowd of people. This was perfectly fine with me because it meant I didn’t have to talk to anyone. Kaitlin was in front of me and I had to restrain myself from sticking a foot out to trip her. It would be so easy to reach around and hook her ankle with my own. I fantasized about the fall the whole way to the lanes.

After a few minutes of being jostled by the masses, we arrived to find the party had started without us. We emerged from the crowd right as Logan launched his ball. With a powerful swing and release his ball made a perfect arc towards the pins and hit a hair to the left of the front one with a loud crash. One moment, all the pins were upright, and the next instant they exploded, careening in different directions.

“Way to go, Logan. That was on a spare,” said Alrik, who was sitting in a plastic chair with a score plaque in front of him.

Logan turned with a relaxed and content smile. I didn’t realize I was staring until Romona gave me a gentle and discrete nudge with her elbow. Kevin noticed us a moment later.

“Hey guys! Come to join the fun? Logan and Alrik are cleaning our clocks! We could use some fresh blood. I’m crossing my fingers one of you used to be a professional bowler.” The look on his face was hopeful.

It was always hard not to respond to Kevin’s friendly tone, and so I found myself smiling sincerely back at him. I let my eyes wander and caught Logan watching our small group. He didn’t look pleased that we’d arrived. The smile on his face had disappeared, and he turned away when he when he caught my gaze.

“You guys have room for a few more?” Jonathon asked.

He laid a hand on my lower back and led me towards the lane. I didn’t think he meant anything by it, but it still made me somewhat uncomfortable.

“Sure we do,” replied Kevin. “We saved the whole second lane for you guys.” He extended his hand to Jonathon. I used the excuse to step away from him. “Hey man, it’s Jonathon, right? I didn’t get a chance to meet you the other night. My name’s Kevin.” Kevin was doing a great job normalizing this for me. I made a mental note to find some way to let him know I appreciated it.

“That’s me. It’s nice to meet you, Kevin,” Jonathon said. With a quick hand shake and a nod of their heads, they were on their way to becoming friends.

“Hey guys, I’m going to play on this lane with Amy to even out the guy-girl ratio. Jared will play with you guys,” Kaitlin called, already placing a sparkly pink ball on the other lane’s rack. She then settled into a seat next to a pretty red-head I assumed was Amy. My eyes narrowed. She was either trying to create distance between us, or get closer to Logan. Probably both.

It took a while for our lane to get up and running. There were more introductions with Alrik's friend, Jared, who'd graciously agreed to join our lane. Surprisingly, he wasn't another hunter. He said his job was something to do with numbers, and I immediately forgot the details since my mind was already in such a twist. He was a nice enough guy. He waited patiently for the rest of us to get our shoes and bowling balls.

Jonathon made a valiant attempt at coaching, but it was clear after I clumsily threw my first ball that I was as painfully awful as I had feared. I must have let the ball go at the wrong time because it bounced a few times before landing straight in the gutter. I'm pretty sure bowling balls were supposed to be rolled, not bounced.

Romona and Jonathon both offered encouraging words after that first colossal failure, but I was doomed. It was clear I had exactly zero muscle memory of bowling. After the first few frames, even Romona and Jonathon stopped the pep talks and pretended they weren't looking when it was my turn.

I suffered through the rest of the first game with an underwhelming score of seventeen. There wasn't an icee big enough to make up for that. I would have been happy to leave after one game but was talked, or rather cajoled, into staying for a second. Eventually I came to terms with my lack of skills and settled for simply enjoying the company when in the middle of game two Alrik spoke up.

“So, Aud, you ready for tomorrow?”

I frowned back at him. “What's so special about tomorrow?”

“What? Don't tell me you don't know,” Alrik continued after my continued silence. “Well that's a surprise. Tomorrow's your first mission little Aud.”

I glanced at Logan who was conversing with Kevin. He'd barely said two words to anyone on my lane all night.

What Alrik said couldn't be true Logan would have said something to me. You don't spring someone's first mission on her when she shows up to train for the day. I looked at Alrik in disbelief. He must have it wrong. I told him as much.

"I don't know, Aud, I heard it from up the chain. It seems you've created quite a stir. You have a number of people who are interested to see how your first official mission goes considering the adventure from your last trip to Earth."

I still blushed every time someone brought that up. Rather than stand there and argue with Alrik, it was better to go to the source and get some answers. I crossed the invisible barrier between our lanes to talk to Logan.

He was still in conversation with Kevin, but they looked up when I approached. The casual and friendly mood Logan had with Kevin vanished when I faced them. I watched him slip on his mask of indifference. I sighed internally. Was it always going to be this way?

"What's this about my first mission being tomorrow?" I pointed a thumb behind me towards Alrik. "He's got it wrong, right?"

"Isn't it your turn to bowl?" Anxiety bloomed from Logan's deflection.

"Logan, come on, is there something you're not telling me? If it's true I would have appreciated a little more heads up about something this important." A fist landed on my hip to broadcast my irritation.

“What’s this important?” Jonathon appeared behind me and presumptuously slipped a hand around my waist. It irked me, but I was too focused on whatever Logan was going to say to do something about it.

Logan’s face remained unreadable. But I did catch his eyes flicker to my waist where Jonathon’s hand was resting before darting up to catch mine. It was annoying that the full effect of Logan’s stare was still able to do funny things to my insides.

“There’s nothing to give you the heads up about. You’re not going.”

He actually had the nerve to turn back to Kevin as if I wasn’t even there. Did he think I was a child to be dismissed with a wave of a hand?

I quickly stepped out of Jonathon’s reach and did the unthinkable. I grabbed Logan’s forearm to get his attention. It was barely a fraction of a second before he snatched his arm away, but it did the trick. I had his full attention. It only took that moment of contact to realize that the indifference he’d cloaked himself in was insincere. I was taken aback at the strong emotions churning inside him. There was some satisfaction in that. Logan glared back as if I’d committed some giant violation of his privacy. Which perhaps I had, but was beyond caring.

“What do you mean, I’m not going?”

He’d leaned back so I would have to take a step forward to touch him again.

“I contested the decision. You’re not ready.” It was said matter-of-factly, as if I shouldn’t have a reaction towards it.

“Excuse me! You contested the decision? What gave you the right?” Unlike Logan, my emotions were on display for everyone to see.

“The fact that I’m your mentor, and I don’t think you’re ready.”

That cut. I flinched away as if I'd been physically slapped. I knew Logan wasn't a hundred percent pleased with my progress, but I thought I was getting better. To contest an order meant he really doubted my abilities. Logan's face remained hard, although when I recoiled I might have seen something soften in his eyes, but it was gone in an instant.

“Hey man, that was kind of harsh.”

Jonathon stepped forward to defend me. He didn't put his arm around my waist as he had before, but he was standing close enough to make a point. The way Logan's eyes never left mine you'd think he hadn't heard him, but a moment later he addressed Jonathon stoically.

“This isn't your business.”

Jonathon wasn't deterred.

“Maybe not, but even I know you're not playing by the rules. I know how these things work, too. We interact with hunters on a regular basis. She's right you don't have the authority to make that decision, even if you are her mentor. If it was a direct order, only Audrey can contest it.”

I turned my head to gawk at Jonathon. Could he be right? The look on Logan's face said that he was less than pleased with what Jonathon had revealed. When he didn't respond, it verified that Jonathon spoke the truth.

Man, I could have kissed Jonathon. Figuratively speaking, of course. I felt victory within my grasp. I smiled brightly back at Logan, ready to end the issue and get back to my embarrassingly bad game of bowling. Logan wasn't quite ready to concede.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You weren’t there the first time we went down.” He addressed Jonathon coolly. “It was a sliver away from being a full blown catastrophe.”

“Hey, that’s not fair! If you remember, I was the one who finally got us out of trouble,” I said through clenched teeth.

Logan’s eyes widened and then narrowed again. It was as if he was picking up the unspoken gauntlet I’d just thrown down.

“I had everything under control,” he said. “Besides, it’s not as if your *methods* would really come in handy in another situation.”

“Well at least I know how to think on my feet,” I shot back.

I was extremely glad for the low lighting because I was fairly certain both of our faces were on fire. Even though no one - that is except Romona - really knew what we were truly talking about our friends were giving us strange looks.

I was so wound up I practically jumped out of my skin when Jonathon laid a calming hand between my shoulder blades. Then he put another on my waist and turned me towards him to force my attention. His words were soft and kind.

“Listen, don’t worry about it. I was serious about what I said before. He can’t do anything to change their mind. You’ll be able to go if you want to.”

I knew I was being handled, but considering Logan and I had publicly stumbled upon a very personal topic, it was probably best to listen to Jonathon and let the disagreement with Logan drop.

He rewarded me with a friendly smile when he saw I was responding to him.

“Now come on, it’s your turn to bowl. No use fighting about nothing. Right now, you only need to dig deep and prove you have some bowling skills hidden up your sleeve somewhere.”

Right, as if that was going to happen.

I forced myself not to look back at Logan while Jonathon steered me towards our lane. He found it safe to let go when I stepped up on the hardwood to collect my purple bowling ball.

“Okay, Audrey,” I heard someone shout behind me, “with all those gutters, statistically speaking it’s about time you got some points on the board.”

I rolled my eyes and ignored the heckler, who I was pretty sure was Alrik. *You can do this, you are going to knock down all the pins.*

I told myself to pretend the pins had Logan’s face plastered on them. I held the ball up in front of me and took a deep breath before taking my steps. As I moved, I swung my right arm smoothly back then forward and released. I may have closed my eyes for it was only when I heard the loud clash of the ball connecting with the target that I knew I’d finally hit something. It took a few long seconds to grasp every pin had been knocked down and the arm sweeper was coming down to clear the lane. I heard a few shouts of congratulations from behind me.

I turned to face my on-lookers, beyond excited about my brilliant strike and started an impromptu victory dance. What I didn’t realize in my jubilation was that I’d danced too close to the end of the lane and was a single step away from falling over the edge. I figured it out a moment later when my foot came down expecting to hit the heavily shellacked wood floor but instead sank lower in the air, finally hitting the linoleum floor of the seating area at a weird angle and giving out on me, which was followed by my knee buckling, sending my face on a collision

course with the hard floor. I only had time to let out a sharp yelp and to dread the pain I was about to feel.

But it never came. I was embraced in steely arms, as the upper half of my body lay horizontal to the floor. I had no idea how someone had gotten to me that fast, let alone flipped me around before I face planted in the ground, but I was thankful for it.

I heard Kaitlin's familiar voice chirp, "You see, Logan, that's what a gallant rescue is *supposed* to look like!"

It was Logan I saw first over my rescuer's shoulder. He was standing with a slightly shocked look on his face. A rarity for Logan. With the slight downturn of his mouth, the stunned look phased into one of disappointment. I briefly wondered if he was disappointed in my lack of balance, or if it was something else.

"You okay, Audrey?" Jonathon's words were said against my ear.

He pulled back only far enough to look me in the eyes. His brown ones were filled with genuine concern. Despite myself, I felt something inside melt with his regard. There was something nice about having someone worried about your welfare. It took me another moment to find my voice.

"Ah, yeah."

"You sure? You could have twisted an ankle."

Since Jonathon was still holding most my weight, I wasn't sure how my ankle fared. When focused my attention on it there was a slight throbbing.

"I think I'm all right, but my ankle does hurt a little, but I'm sure... Yikes!" Jonathon reached down to scoop me under my knees and pull me straight into the air.

“Jonathon, seriously, I’m sure I can walk.”

He didn’t answer but quirked an eyebrow up at me, then gently settled me into a seat. Amazingly, he did this all without connecting with any bare skin. I was thankful for that. I was a bundle of mixed emotions at the moment.

“Now let’s take a look at this foot of yours.”

Without asking for permission, he plopped down in front of me, took off my shoe and placed my sock covered foot in his hand. It had gotten surprisingly quiet around me. I looked up. Wide eyes all around, yet no talking.

On instinct, I looked for Logan but couldn’t find him anymore. I finally settled my gaze on Romona who was making hand gestures to her hair and frantically trying to mouth something to me. With a gasp, I realized what she was trying to tell me and grabbed a chunk to inspect it.

“Did that hurt?” Jonathon quickly looked up when I’d yelped. He had been putting gentle pressure on different points of my ankle and assumed I’d cried out in pain. His mouth turned into a smile that reached his eyes when he saw me inspecting my hair. The look I returned was one of pure mortification. As far as I could tell, my hair was highlighted with various shades of blues and silver that were currently melting into pink.

“When did this happen?” I asked holding out a clump in front of me.

The upturned corners of Jonathon’s mouth proved he was trying to hold back some of his amusement.

“It actually started right before your fall, when you were doing your celebratory dance. It has been getting progressively....” he paused to search for the right word, “multi-hued since then. I didn’t think it would be polite to point it out.”

“Oh perfect! As if any of this could get more embarrassing. I’m never bowling again.”

I slumped forward in my seat and put my face in my hands to hide the changing color from my eyes.

“Well on the upside, I think you might be able to keep your ankle after all. If none of those points I pushed are sensitive, you’re probably going to be fine.”

I didn’t answer him, just blew out a puff of air in indifference. My ankle was the least of my worries. Was there a limit to the number of times someone could embarrass themselves? If so, I’m sure to have exceeded it.

It occurred to me suddenly that, if my ankle were hurt, Logan would use that to keep me grounded tomorrow. I quickly shot to my feet. I sighed in relief when I successfully put pressure on my ankle.

“Phew!”

“Just remembered that a hurt ankle could bench you tomorrow, huh?” he said.

I looked down at Jonathon, still crouched on the floor and holding my bowling shoe in his hand, ready to help me back into it. Overwhelmed with emotions, I couldn’t hold back a giggle at the irony.

“Going to help Cinderella with her shoe, are you?”

Jonathon smiled up at Alrik good-naturedly. “That’s if milady will accept the assistance.” And he bowed his head for extra dramatics.

Both Jonathon and Alrik seemed to be waiting for something from me. When I didn’t supply it right away, Alrik spoke up once again.

“Perhaps she’s holding out for a different prince.”

I found his eyes with a question in mine, but Alrik simply winked at me as if we were sharing a joke and then turned to take his turn. *That was weird.*

In the meantime, Jonathon had taken my silence as an indication that I either didn't need or didn't want his help with my shoe and straightened, handing it back to me. I smiled gratefully at him.

I took another look around and noted that things had gone back to normal. Enough so that it was almost my turn to bowl again. Despite the upturn in my game, I'd had enough for the evening. I scanned the group and noticed that Logan was still missing. I turned to see Kaitlin eyeing me with a slightly anxious look on her face. I got the sudden impression that something she'd planned for this night had gone awry.

"Where's Logan?" I called over to her.

She shrugged her shoulders in response. "I think he might have taken off early."

"Oh."

The news surprisingly disappointed me. Romona came up beside me and reminded me of a pressing matter, which was fixing my rainbow hair. I was quickly regretting that I'd ever learned how to change the color because I lost control of it at the most inopportune moments.

"Oh right!" I turned to Jonathon. "I'm going to head to the bathroom to take care of this." I picked up a strand of my hair. "Would you mind bowling my next frame?"

"No problem."

"Thanks." I smiled warmly at him.

Romona and I weaved our way to the bathroom. When we got there, I realized the full extent of the disaster that was my hair. It was a spaghetti mess of blues, silvers, and pinks.

Romona was silent while I took a moment to focus. I breathed a sign of relief when I opened my eyes to see it had returned to brown.

“I wouldn’t be breathing easily just yet if I were you.”

I turned to her. “What do you mean?”

“You were playing with fire out there.”

“Still not following.”

“With Jonathon and Logan.”

“Playing with fire? What’s that supposed to mean?” There was a defensive note in my own voice. “I’m not doing anything. It’s not as if I fell on purpose. If Jonathon hadn’t caught me before I hit the floor, I’d be in pretty bad shape right now. I was headed towards the ground face first you know. Besides, it was Kaitlin who set this whole mess up anyway.” I happily shirked any responsibility off of myself and onto her.

“Yes, that’s a good point.” She looked thoughtful. “And I wouldn’t mind having a little talk with her to see exactly what the point of all of this was.”

“Oh no you won’t. Kaitlin’s the last person I’d want you questioning and perhaps raising suspicion with.”

Romona frowned at me. Clearly not liking that I vetoed her plan.

“Besides,” I shrugged, “I think you are overreacting about Logan and Jonathon.”

She took a moment to reconsider before firmly shaking her head.

“I don’t think so. You didn’t see Logan’s face when Jonathon caught you.”

My curiosity instantly peeked. “Really, what did it look like?”

Romona’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I thought you didn’t care what Logan thought about you?”

“Ah, well....” *Oops. Think, think!*

Romona nodded to herself. “Just as I thought. Remember what we talked about yesterday, Audrey? I don’t think Logan is as indifferent to you as you’d like to believe. Imagine if the situation was reversed with Logan and a different girl.”

“Ha, I’d love to see a girl try to catch Logan. She’d end up flattened like a pancake.” I purposefully misinterpreted her statement.

“You know what I mean. Anyway, I think you need to be a little more conscious of your actions around those guys. You have too many complications with them as it is.”

I heaved a heavy sigh. I knew she was right, but why did all of this have to be so complicated? Was anything about my life after death going to be simple?

“Okay, mom, I’ll be more careful.”

Romona didn’t respond to that with words. Instead, she simultaneously shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“Besides, right now your head should be on your mission tomorrow.”

“Yep. Let’s get out there and say our goodbyes. It’s been a crazy night. I’m ready to call it quits. At least I’ll be ending on a high note.”

Romona’s eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

“You know, my spectacular strike? Nowhere to go but down from there.”

She laughed and pushed open the bathroom door. She didn’t catch the concerned look I gave her back as we walked out. In truth, I wasn’t sure what I was more shaken up about tonight, my first mission, Jonathon, or Logan. I wasn’t ready to know the answer to that quite yet.