

2024 HIGH SCHOOL SHORT STORY WINNER

The Coffee Shop

By Abigail Ott

Kendra checked her phone again. She had already been waiting 15 minutes for her date to show up, but he hadn't even texted to say he was going to be late. She tried not to judge him. After all, he might have had an emergency at work and not had a chance to text her. She knew she dealt with emergencies often enough, though she always tried to text her dates when she was going to be late. She fiddled with her necklace. She had to remind herself why she was doing this. She needed to find someone who could support her as she fought for her people. She knew she needed someone ordinary to show people that Unalans could be loved and appreciated, not just feared and despised. She didn't meet a lot of ordinary people in her day-to-day life, so she had gone on dating apps to find someone.

Kendra got up, restless, and went into the bathroom to check her makeup in the mirror. She looked pretty today. Her honey-colored skin glowed in the sunlight. Her glossy black hair was pulled back into a loose twist, but some shorter pieces had come out and framed her face nicely. Her eyes, which were naturally a red-orange color so bold they looked like they were aflame, were hidden under dark brown contact lenses, specially designed by a friend so that she could scan for U-rays, which were emitted by all Unalans, including herself. They weren't always scanning, or she would be able to distinguish very little when she was with her friends, but by looking right at someone and doing a specific sequence of blinks, she could see whether or not they were Unalan. It was handy for days like today, when she wanted to get a read on someone without giving away her own position.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and went back out. Sitting down again, she took another sip of her coffee and glanced out the window, then back down at her phone. Still nothing. One of the baristas came out to give her a refill. “He stand you up, Kendra?”

“I’m going to give him a bit longer. Maybe he had an emergency or something. Thanks, though, Annie.”

Annie shook her head. “Always wanting to believe the best of people. I like that about you. How ’bout this: Every cup of coffee from now until he shows up or you leave is free.”

“But then I’ll never want to leave.”

Annie put her hand on her hip and looked down at Kendra. “Well, we close at 10, as you know, so you’ll have to be gone by then.”

“If I’m right, he’ll have shown up or texted me long before then.”

“We’ll see.” Annie shook her head again and moved off to another table.

Kendra smiled. She had been coming here for years, so she knew all the baristas and many of the regulars personally. She had had almost all of her first dates here, from the ones who had never shown up to the ones who had broken up with her after a few months because she “just didn’t prioritize their relationship” or she “worked too much” or they “felt like she was holding part of herself back” or something like that. A small portion of the regulars were guys who had fallen in love with the coffee shop when she had introduced it to them and kept going there even after they had broken up with her. She didn’t hold a grudge; she knew her job was demanding and had known from the beginning how hard it would be to find someone willing to put up with it. So far, she hadn’t been able to find that person, but she just kept swiping right and trying again.

She had finished her coffee and gotten a third cup before the bell on top of the shop door rang to announce Jered's entrance. He was rather handsome: a tall white man with dirty blond hair and pale green eyes. As he spotted her and strode over, she scanned him for U-rays, but with a negative result.

"Kendra Mayfire?" he asked.

"That's me," she replied. "Jered Peters?"

He nodded and sat down. She expected him to apologize for being so late, or at least offer an explanation, but he didn't even mention it. Not a good sign.

As they started conversing, she fiddled with her necklace—apparently unconsciously—drawing his eyes down to the amethyst pendant, but he didn't react to it. Not a Friend, then, either.

She slowly and expertly guided the conversation, as she had done so many times before, until she could work in how something "reminded her of Janet."

He naturally asked who Janet was.

"Oh, just a girl I knew in middle school," she replied casually. "She was actually Unalan."

The effect was immediate. His face darkened. His mouth twisted up in disgust. "Unalans." He said it like a curse word. "They're evil. Demon spawn come to terrorize us with their twisted forms and unnatural powers."

Kendra went still. "You think so?" she asked, her voice icy cold.

"You want to know what I think? I think they should all be hunted down and killed like the monsters they are."

Kendra had heard enough. This privileged, bloated white man was condoning the centuries of torment and fear that her people had gone through, championing the Midnight Massacre that had decimated their numbers and traumatized so many, spitting on the graves of brave heroes like Amethyst, Malcolm, her father, and so many others who had sacrificed their lives for their fellow Unalans. It was disgusting.

The fire inside of her flared, tingling invisibly just beneath her skin, as she started in a falsely calm voice, “Did you know that most Unalans don’t look that different from ordinary people?”

“What do you mean?”

“Most Unalans just have tiny differences: an odd hair color, sparkling skin, something that can easily be disguised with cosmetics or another little fix. They’re all around us, just living their lives.”

He was silent: half-confused, half-stunned. She smirked.

“In fact, you probably know at least one already. And they’re not trying to—how did you put it—‘terrorize you with their unnatural powers.’ Most of them are just trying to survive. And hunting them down? That’s already been tried. Multiple times.” She was standing now. “But it’s never going to work. You know why? Because there’s always going to be someone willing to stand up for their people, to fight back against the murderers.” She leaned forward, blinking twice quickly to turn off the tinting on her contact lenses and allow the fire in her eyes to shine through. “Someday, we’re going to have our own haven, a safe place for anyone in danger, where we don’t have to hide who we are. But until then, I, Kendra Mayfire, chief of the Unalans, am responsible for keeping my people safe from idiots like you, Jered, who want to hurt them.” She held her fist

up, the back of her hand facing him so he could see some of the scars on it, and shot a spurt of fire out of the knuckle on her middle finger, which formed into the shape of a bird as it flared up. Then, she turned and marched out of the coffee shop.

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The next day, Kendra returned to the coffee shop, a hood pulled low over her face so she wouldn't be recognized. She had been practically yelling by the end of her rant yesterday, and she knew every eye in the coffee shop had been on her when she had stormed out. She had no idea what the reaction had been, so she needed to test the waters to see if she could keep going there. She was especially nervous because this place was so close to her heart and she didn't want to lose it.

She paused outside the shop. They had drawn some new art on the window, which wasn't very unusual as they changed it up regularly, but this art was different. It was a coffee cup with steam rising out of it, which wasn't unexpected, but the steam seemed to be in the form of a phoenix, like the one she had formed with her flame yesterday. It was a good sign, but even better was the chalkboard set up outside the shop. It was always there, but since yesterday, someone had added some stick-on rhinestones in a little pattern on the top. It wouldn't have been significant, but all the jewels were purple, like the amethysts all Unalans and their supporters, known as "Friends," wore. It made her slightly hopeful, but it wasn't enough to keep her from covering her face as much as possible when she walked in.

The moment the bell on the door rang, everyone in the shop looked up. It was more crowded than usual, as if all the regulars had decided that particular day and time to stop by. Most were wearing something purple, some more subtle than others, but all purposeful. As she went to

the counter, they all went back to what they had been doing, but a lot of them nodded and smiled at her as she passed.

When she got to the counter to order, she noticed that two of the drink names had been changed. A cold drink made with blueberries that had been called the Ambrosia Berry Cooler Drink was now called the Amethyst Berry Cooler Drink, and a coffee drink with chile powder, the Warm Heart Spicy Latte, her personal favorite, was now the Phoenix Fire Latte.

“One of your usual?” the barista, Annie, asked, smiling.

“Yes, please,” Kendra got out her wallet to pay.

Annie shook her head. “It’s on us. Least we could do after your horrible date yesterday.”

Kendra noticed that her name tag was decorated with purple rhinestones. “Thank you,” she said sincerely. “It’s nice to see this much support.”

“Of course! Now go sit down, and we’ll bring your drink to you.” Annie nodded over to Kendra’s usual table, which, despite the unusual crowd of people, was free.

As she walked to her table, more people smiled and nodded at her. She was almost tearing up by now at the incredible show of support from this community. When the barista brought her coffee with a note of support signed by all the other employees of the shop, tears actually welled in her eyes. She had never expected this much solidarity from everyone. It was incredible.

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A few months later, the coffee shop had changed even more. A lot of the decor was now in various shades of purple, and most of the drinks had been renamed things that had hidden meanings for Unalans. Even the coffee shop itself had gone through a rebranding. Where before it

had been The Cozy Coffee Corner, it was now Rebirth Coffee, a change outsiders assumed was an effort to stay “cool” and “hip,” but was really an allusion to the phoenix rising from the ashes, which was how many Unalans viewed their people under Kendra’s leadership. The sign was even a phoenix made of steam rising out of a coffee cup.

The culture of the shop had changed as well. At Kendra’s suggestion, they had hired a new barista who could sense Unalans’ powers, and more Unalans felt safe coming to the shop because of her. Those regulars who didn’t approve of Unalans gradually came to feel that they were not wanted, so they found other shops to visit. The shop didn’t suffer from their loss, however, as many Unalans and Friends saw it on the internet, or just noticed it as they walked by, and, correctly interpreting the hints, realized that this shop was welcoming to those like them and started to visit regularly.

Kendra herself got coffee there every day, and the shop gave her hope. There would always be people like Jered in the world, people who hated and feared Unalans, but there would also be places like this, where Unalans could gather without fear, where they could come together in an actual community. She started to believe even more that her dream would one day come true. Maybe Unalans could get their own territory someday; maybe, eventually, people would stop hating them. But even if that didn’t happen in her lifetime, there would still be havens like this, where people could come together to love and support one another, and where Unalans could truly be free.