



A STRANGE REFLECTION

Soft, golden rays of morning sunshine passed through a window and fell across a child sleeping in a bed. The child rolled away from the piercing sunlight, but her mind had been awakened from slumber and it refused to go back to sleep. *Should have remembered to close the blinds*, the girl thought sleepily. So she opened her eyes, blinking, and looked out the window, slowly adjusting to the brightness as she gazed on the familiar panoramic view. There was the barn, with the horses in the paddock next to it. There was the grass-filled meadow, which served as a playground for herself and her friends. The woods beyond the meadow contained many wild animals and covered most of the valley in which the girl lived, as well as the mountains surrounding it – the same mountains that framed this view better than any picture frame could. The girl loved the mountains. They made her feel secure, like they were ancient sentinels guarding her from any and all harm. She yawned and stretched lazily. It looked like a lovely summer day out there, and though the girl enjoyed the slow sensation of her body waking from a night of peaceful sleep, she disliked wasting time once she was awake.

Looking back out the window, she could see the top of her friends' house. She smiled as she recalled that they had gotten back

from their Florida vacation late the night before and would be over today. That thought provided a good reason for getting out of bed. The girl heard her mother in the kitchen and sniffed the air. *Pancakes*, she thought. *Yum*. Her father was likely in the kitchen, too, eating breakfast before going to his job at the University of Virginia. The chance of saying goodbye to him was another good reason to get up. She stretched and yawned again before making up her mind. *Well, Cassie, you might as well get up so David and Sarah don't come over and find you still in pajamas*, she told herself.

Resolute, she rolled from bed and went to the bathroom, brushed her teeth quickly, and threw on some clothes, humming to herself, not even bothering to brush her hair or glance into her bathroom mirror. Her dad stuck to a strict morning schedule, and she didn't want to miss him. It was just before she left her room that Cassie's day took a decidedly unexpected turn.

Now feeling completely awake, Cassie was headed for the door when she threw a passing glance toward the mirror above her dresser... and froze in mid-step. She turned more fully toward the mirror; she was sure she had seen something strange in it. She looked carefully in the reflection's background and, finding nothing wrong, turned her attention to herself. She scrutinized her face, seeing at first just her usual features: strawberry-blond hair, vivid gray-blue eyes, delicate-looking facial features, and small, pinkish lips. Then Cassie's gaze turned to her ears.

Her mouth dropped open and her heart skipped a couple of beats. *Check again*, she told herself. So she did, leaning closer for a better look, almost pressing her nose against the mirror. She stared at her reflection for several minutes, trying to understand what she was seeing. The tips of her ears, which she knew had been rounded yesterday, now had slight points, which most people would not have noticed from the corner of their eye. Cassie, however, was not most people. She put a hand up and felt what her eyes were telling her, then sat down hard on the bed, trying to digest the information.



Cassie stared at her reflection. The tips of her ears, which she knew had been rounded yesterday, now had slight points.

Cassie knew she was a little different from other people. She had far better sight and hearing than everyone else she knew, and people noticed, commenting on it. It didn't bother her that much, but her keen hearing did become problematic in crowds. As such, she had learned to avoid large crowds, or to take earplugs to crowded places, which diluted her hearing enough that the noise was bearable. Sometimes, too, she overheard things she knew she shouldn't, which put her in a very awkward position. She generally resolved it by going to the person concerned in private and confessing what she had overheard. The people were grateful when she told them, but remained a little wary around her ever after, which made her feel sad. Even grown-ups sometimes acted warily around Cassie, though she was of the opinion that they should behave differently from the kids at school.

School, in particular, was a bit of a struggle, as she knew she was exceptionally bright for someone her age, so bright that her parents and teachers had decided it would be best for her to skip a whole grade. So she had been placed in third grade after first, instead of going to second with the rest of her classmates. The older kids had been surprised, but on the whole they didn't mind, and Cassie loved the more advanced things she was learning. Her friends in the grade below were happy for her, as they knew that what they were studying had been boring for her. But not everyone felt the same. Some of the kids in her old class who weren't her friends resented her for her intellect and bullied her a bit, though she tried to downplay her intelligence and offered to help them with their schoolwork. Eventually she gave it up and avoided places where she would be teased, because she had overheard her parents debating one day whether or not to homeschool her because of the days she occasionally came home from school in tears. She liked school, and she had a few close friends who didn't mind her differences. She didn't want to stop school, and if that meant having

to take the long way to the water fountain or playground, that was okay with her.

But what really marked her as unique went beyond just having keen sight, acute hearing, and a sharp intellect. For some reason she didn't know, Cassie had the talent of being able to talk to animals. She had been able to do it for as long as she could remember. Until her parents told her otherwise, she had assumed all people could do it. This ability was top secret. Only six people in the world, besides herself and the animals, knew about it: her parents; David and Sarah, whom she told pretty much everything and who were sworn to secrecy; and their parents.

But none of those differences were physically obvious. Cassie had never heard of anyone with pointed ears, except for elves. That thought gave her pause, as she remembered that Dad had told her on many occasions that elves only existed in books or movies, yet here she stood with the identifying elven mark.

She was still thinking about her problem when the big family dog Kaiser, or Kai as everyone called him, came into the room. He was a dark brown wolfhound mix who had been with the family since before Cassie was born. He showed no signs of aging, however, something that regularly amazed their veterinarian, as dogs of his size and breeding did not generally live past ten years or so. *Your mother says you need to come downstairs if you want to see your dad before he leaves, and if you would like hot pancakes*, he told her. *Why are you standing there staring at the mirror? Having trouble with your hair this morning?* he asked in a teasing tone.

"I have a problem," Cassie replied, perplexed. She positioned her head near Kai's so he could see the problem. "Look."

Kai was silent for a minute, then shoved her from behind and said, *Go, you need to show your parents before your father leaves*. All teasing was gone from his voice. Cassie tried to protest, but there was no arguing with the over-a-hundred-pound dog when he decided she

needed to go somewhere. He then took hold of her sleeve and pulled her down the stairs to the kitchen, where her parents were talking about plans for the day. They stopped when they saw Cassie and Kai in the doorway, the former with an annoyed look on her face.

“What is it?” Cassie’s mother Leah asked. Kai rarely dragged the delicate-looking ten-year-old anywhere, and whenever he did, it was generally important. Kai released Cassie’s sleeve with a final directive to tell her parents, and sat down with his head nudging her toward them. Cassie looked at her parents, trying to figure out how to explain. Both looked at her with curiosity. Neither was quite sure what to expect from their daughter at any given time.

Any onlooker observing them would see how like the parents the child was. Her mother, Leah, had dark red hair and gray eyes; was slender, around five inches over five feet; and although she might not be considered classically pretty, her face was friendly and open. Tyler Pennington, or Ty as his friends and associates called him, was a respected history professor and archaeologist, specializing in the early Middle Ages, and was considered quite handsome, with fair hair, brilliant green eyes, and a six-foot frame.

Cassie heaved a breath. “Ummm... this will sound weird, but... my ears are pointed.”

“What?” both parents asked, sounding alarmed.

“My ears are pointed,” Cassie repeated, saying the words in an almost detached manner. “Look.” She pointed and turned her head slightly so her parents could see, pulling her hair back to reveal the strange shape.

They looked. Her dad knelt next to her and lightly ran a finger along the edge of her ear. Strangely enough (in Cassie’s opinion), there was no confusion on either parent’s face, only worry, shock, and a resigned look, like something each had feared was confirmed and they could do nothing about it. Ty put a hand on each of Cassie’s arms and looked her in the eye. “When did you first discover this?” he asked in a tone that was deadly serious.

Cassie gulped, having rarely heard her father speak in such a way. “J-Just this morning,” she replied, stuttering slightly.

“Are you sure? Absolutely sure, Cassie?”

“Yeah.” She wondered why Dad was asking her like it was a life-or-death question. “Why did my ears get pointed? This is definitely *not* normal, and they weren’t like this yesterday.” She looked from one parent to the other. Both seemed tense, and they looked at each other as if holding a silent conference.

Finally Ty sighed. “I have to go to work. To answer your question, Cassie, in another person, you’re right, it wouldn’t be normal, but for you...” His voice trailed off and he turned to grab his coat and briefcase. He bent down to look straight into Cassie’s eyes. “Don’t show or tell anyone about your ears, Cassie. It could attract... unwanted attention.”

She gazed fixedly back at him, wondering what “unwanted attention” meant, but knowing by the veiled look in his green eyes that she would get no answer to that particular question right then. She went with a safer one. “Not even Sarah and David?” It was almost unimaginable to her not to tell her best friends something.

“Even them. I promise I’ll explain everything tonight. Just don’t worry about it too much, okay?” He tried to smile, but his effort was overshadowed by the worry in his eyes.

“Do you have to go today, Ty?” Leah asked.

Ty sighed and grimaced. “Unfortunately, yes. I told Evan I’d do the college tours scheduled for today while he’s on vacation. Otherwise, I would definitely stay.” So saying, he went out the door to the car after giving Cassie a quick hug and kissing Leah on the cheek. Leah and Cassie listened until the car couldn’t be heard any longer.

“What did Dad mean when he said that... this... was normal for me?” Cassie asked her mother.

Leah sighed. “He meant that only certain, special people have pointed ears and such people are in your family tree,” she explained. Cassie frowned as she considered this.

Kai looked over at Cassie and said, *Do not worry about it, girl. It means you are strong, and we need a strong one. There has not been a strong one for a long time.*

Cassie looked at him, her confusion growing by the minute. *What do you mean?* she asked him silently.

Just what I said, the dog replied mysteriously.

“Cassie, eat some pancakes. They have chocolate chips,” Leah said as she placed a plate on the counter, unaware of the silent exchange. Cassie decided to do what Dad had said and not worry. For the rest of breakfast anyway.



During the drive to UVA, Ty mused over what he had learned that morning. *Yes, I suspected the Blood was strong in her, he thought, but not that strong! She's only just turned ten!* None with the Blood had had pointed ears for several centuries, and the fact that Cassie showed such signs of her unique ancestry heightened the risk with which the family already lived. *It will be that much easier for the Brotherhood to find us, he worried. All someone has to do is look at Cassie closely enough to find the secret. At least we don't live in a town, where such things are more likely to be noticed.* Ty's thoughts turned from his daughter's ears to figuring out what explanation to give her. The real trick would be telling her just enough to satisfy her curiosity without letting her know how much potential danger she was in from the Brotherhood. As he parked his car in the university lot, he decided to give the matter more thought in his free time, and began to focus on what he would be talking about with prospective students that day.



After breakfast was finished and the kitchen cleaned up, Cassie followed her mother to the master bedroom. Cassie sat on her parents' bed while Leah rummaged around in a drawer, pulled out

a headband, and walked over to where Cassie was seated. “Now, Cassie, this is important. From now on you need to wear this headband when you are in public or with anyone other than myself or your father. Understood?” Leah looked intently into her daughter’s eyes for understanding. Cassie nodded.

“I have to wear it even when I’m with David and Sarah?” she asked, just to be sure. Wearing something over her ears all the time was going to be annoying.

“Yes, even with them.” Leah positioned the headband on Cassie’s head, making sure that it covered the tips of her ears, but wasn’t so tight that the shape of the ears showed through the fabric.

“But what will I tell them it’s for? I don’t want to lie.” Cassie raised troubled eyes to her mother.

Leah thought about this for a minute. “Tell them it’s for protecting the tips of your ears from the sun,” she finally said. “It *will* help protect them, and it should satisfy their curiosity. They know you burn easily. If they keep asking, tell them that I’m making you wear it. Which I am.” Leah smiled, but it was fragile. “Don’t worry, honey, you may be able to tell them someday, but for now you need to keep quiet. Okay?”

“Okay,” Cassie agreed, feeling more confused than ever. She put a hand up to the material. “Wait, did you know my ears would become pointed? How come you knew what to do?” she asked suspiciously.

Leah sighed. “No, Cassie, we didn’t know. But I am ready because your father and I talked about what we could do to hide pointed ears if it happened, unlikely as it seemed, because your father, as you know, believes in preparing for every sort of eventuality.” Cassie nodded. She did know that. Her dad was the most prepared person she knew. She had decided a long time ago that his life’s philosophy could be summed up in two words: *Semper Paratus*. It was Latin for “always prepared.” She wanted to ask more questions – such as, how had her father known to prepare for this situation? – but she knew she would get no hard, concrete answers

until Dad returned that night. So all the questions that were going around in her head stayed there, until her thoughts were interrupted by a message from Penny, Leah's horse, that David and Sarah's car was pulling into the driveway.

Cassie jumped up and raced for the door. Leah looked up, a little startled by her daughter's sudden departure, but she had a good idea as to the cause. *You'd think she hadn't seen her friends in two months instead of two weeks*, she mused.

In the meantime Cassie had reached the door, and she opened it as the Thompson family hopped out of the car. She ran to the twins who had been her best friends since age five, when Cassie's family had moved to the valley. She hugged them enthusiastically.

"You're back! I've missed you so much. It gets boring when you're the only kid around, even with all the animals."

David laughed. "I'll bet."

Sarah grinned widely. "Well, the trip was pretty fun. It's too bad your family couldn't come. We went to SeaWorld, saw Shamu, and swam with dolphins."

Her brother laughed. "No, Sarah, *you* took an unplanned swim with the dolphins." Sarah rolled her eyes.

"It was still fun," she retorted.

"Unplanned swim?" Cassie asked, looking them over. The resemblance between the Thompson twins was easy enough to see, but they weren't identical. They both shared the same dark brown hair, but Sarah had hazel eyes and her hair was curly, while David's eyes were as dark as his hair, which was as straight as a board. The children were interrupted by Leah coming out and greeting Hannah, the twins' mother.

"Why don't you kids go and play in the meadow? I'm sure you three have a lot to catch up on," Leah suggested. The idea was greeted with enthusiasm by the youngsters and they raced each other to the barn, with Kai following to keep them out of trouble. Leah and Hannah went inside to the living room, where they could

talk and observe the children at the same time through the window. Leah asked Hannah about her trip and received a lively account of the wonderful time the family had had.

Throughout the conversation, however, Hannah noticed a tension and worry on her friend's face that hadn't been there two weeks ago. "So what's been going on here?" she asked during a lull.

"Not much of note," Leah replied, avoiding the double meaning in the question. "Cassie and Kai found a bald eagle's nest in that big tree by the pond."

"Really? That's wonderful. Benjamin will be excited," Hannah said, referring to her husband. "But you said not much of *note*. What else has happened?" Her blue eyes probed Leah's gray.

Leah sighed, knowing she couldn't keep her friend in the dark long, one of the few people outside the family who knew the secret. "Cassie came down to the kitchen this morning and showed us the tips of her ears. Actually, it's more accurate to say Kai dragged her. Her ears were - are - slightly pointed."

Hannah took in a quick breath. "What? But how? I thought that she's too far removed from a full-blood to have pointed ears."

"That's what we thought. But apparently we were wrong. I don't know how it's possible."

"Have you told her anything?"

"Not yet," Leah said, "Ty had to go to work, so we're going to explain things tonight."

"What have you told her for now? If I know Cassie, she won't be content to wait for tonight."

"I told her not to worry and that it was normal for people like her. I also warned her not to say anything to David or Sarah about it. But she'll likely try to quiz Kai and figure it out for herself."

Hannah nodded, with a little smile on her face. "That would be Cassie for you. But I'm glad you told her to keep it hidden from the twins for the time being. It wouldn't do them any good to have a secret of that magnitude to conceal. They have enough with

hiding her animal speech right now. Don't worry..." Hannah assured Leah as her friend's face took on a look of alarm. "Nothing's slipped, although it was close a couple of times. But they remind each other not to tell, so the secret's safe enough."

Leah sighed again. "Sometimes I wonder just how safe things really are."



Outside, Cassie was also receiving an account of the Thompson family vacation. The trio was lying in the horse pasture getting caught up on all the things that had happened in the last two weeks that mattered to ten-year-olds. They had just finished this and were quietly watching the horses when Sarah, glancing over at Cassie, asked, "Are you upset about something, Cassie?"

Cassie looked at her friend, surprised. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem upset," Sarah replied, sitting up. "You've got that look on your face that you get when you're upset about something."

Cassie thought for a minute about how best to answer that. "I'm much better now that y'all are back. I'm fine. Really."

David piped up with an idea. "Why don't we play blind man's bluff?" The girls readily agreed.

"But what can we use as a blindfold?" Cassie asked.

"What about the headband you're wearing?" Sarah asked.

"Um... no," Cassie said, feeling uncomfortable.

"Why not?"

"Because... because I have to wear it to prevent sunburn. My parents are enforcing it and Kai will tell if I take it off and I'll get in trouble. There's a bandana in the barn we can use." The words tumbled out of her with such speed that the twins barely understood her. She sprang up quickly and ran to get the bandana, leaving David and Sarah feeling very confused.

"What kind of explanation was that?" David asked, looking at his sister.

“I don’t know, but it was weird,” Sarah said, gazing thoughtfully after Cassie. Wearing a headband to prevent sunburn? She’d never heard of such a thing. *Still*, she reasoned, *Cassie does get burned easily. But why couldn’t she take it off for a quick game?* Both twins got the feeling there was another explanation for their friend’s uncharacteristic behavior. However, Cassie soon returned with the bandana and the incident was pushed to the back of their minds as they became engrossed in their game, with the horses and dog looking on.



At the university, Ty was in his office packing up his things for the day. He was reaching for a small, leather-bound journal when he was startled by a sound in the hallway. “Is anyone there?” he called. There was no answer. Frowning, Ty opened the door and looked up and down the hallway. No one was to be seen. *Odd*, he thought as he closed the door again, *I could have sworn I heard someone.*

After thinking it over for a few seconds, he dismissed the sound and went back to his work. Picking up the journal, he paused in his packing to flip carefully through the pages, occasionally scanning one here and there. He was about to put it away in his briefcase when he felt something not quite right. He opened the book again and turned to the very last page, where he had felt the anomaly. Carefully comparing that page to the others, he realized that it was slightly thicker than the other pages, something he hadn’t noticed before and doubted anyone else would. As he looked at the edge, he thought he saw a very faint seam. He realized that two pages had been pasted together somehow, concealing what lay between. Curious, he put a fingernail to it and pulled gently. The seam widened and a piece of paper fell out. Wondering why he hadn’t discovered it before, Ty unfolded the paper and read it. His expression quickly changed to one of shock, which was almost immediately replaced by one of anxiety. *Good grief*, he thought, *if this is true, then Cassie may be in more danger than I thought.* Hearing noises outside the door

indicating classes had been let out, he tucked the journal and the mysterious piece of paper into a pocket of his briefcase and hurriedly finished packing his things. One thing was clear in his mind: before he told Cassie anything, he would show Leah the piece of paper, get her take on it, and decide where to go from there.

Ty picked up his briefcase, opened the door, turned off the lights, and headed to his car, unaware of eyes watching his progress.



Two stories above where Ty walked toward his car, two men stood at a window, watching him as he got in and drove away. “Are you sure?” asked the taller of the men. He spoke in a British accent.

“Well, no,” the other replied in an American accent with the slight southern drawl customary to the central Virginia region. “But I’m suspicious. He’s rather handsome, but that doesn’t have to mean anything. However, I’ve looked around his office when I’ve cleaned it, and I’ve discovered certain documents that make me most curious as to how he got them. He bears watching. I’ve been trying to trace his family ancestry but I’m having an unusually difficult time.”

“Very well, I’ll convey your suspicions to the Master. *He* thinks that the time the ancient witch spoke of is drawing close, and he would very much like to go on living and have her line completely destroyed.”

“I understand,” replied the second man, who leaned against a janitor’s cart and carried a broom. “Oh, by the way, you may want to tell the Master that Pennington has a daughter. A very pretty one too, I must say, and I’ve heard she’s somewhat... unusual.”

“Really?” the first man responded. “The Master will certainly be interested in that. How old and what sort of unusual?”

“Ten. I remember because he brought her in on her birthday a couple of weeks ago. She had a very developed mind for ten, with endless memorized facts floating around in her head – some

knowledge way beyond her years – though some of it may just be from having grown up in a history professor’s household. Her name’s Cassie. Additionally, I’ve heard that she got pushed ahead a grade in school when she was younger.”

The first man’s black eyes glinted with interest, and it wasn’t the good kind. “Fascinating. I will be sure to let the Master know.” He strode from the office, leaving the other man at the window. The man stayed there for a time, then went about attending to his work.