This is not a Drill

*Meep, meep, meep,* the alarm clock blared. Julia rolled over and promptly fell out of bed. She crawled to her dresser and pulled out a tank top she knew she couldn’t wear to school or work, but pulled it on anyway. She decided to stay in her pajama shorts for the day, also forbidden at work and school.

Julia wasn’t a rebel, just lazy. She knew what the rules were, and she didn’t break them on purpose, she just didn’t feel like following them today. Today was just one of those days. A normal day for a normal girl with a normal job and a fairly normal social life (but what is normal in the social world?).

Julia stomped down the hallway and into the kitchen, cringing at her reflection as she passed the bathroom mirror. She looked like a zombie. As she ate her Fruit Loops she attempted to brush her hair, but to no avail. Her dad would have killed her for brushing at the table anyways. Leaving the cereal bowl on the table, she once again tried to brush her hair- in the bathroom this time- and succeeded only in getting the brush stuck in the tangles of her curly brown hair. She splashed some water on her face and did a rough makeup job that made her look less zombie-ish.

Checking the time, she grabbed her schoolbags and rushed out the door. She met her friend Lila at the end of the street like any other school day, any other Monday morning. Little did she know that this ordinary Monday would become spectacularly different…

Julia’s friend Lila was someone who can make people smile just by looking at them. Julia wasn’t a bully or mean cheerleader, but she wasn’t exactly known for her kindness either. Lila was something else. Lila was a peer mentor, an advocate of kindness throughout the whole school, shining like a beacon in a dark world. Every day she came to school with a true smile on her face, and it never left, not even when a Mrs. Densy (their math teacher) gave them extra homework or Ms. Hungston (their science teacher) announced a pop quiz. Lila was not fake, and she wasn’t hiding pain by smiling, either. She was naturally cheerful. She didn’t have to worry about pop quizzes or anything like that either. She was also a high honors student, top of the class (because you can have high honors and still not be top of the class). Everyone at school always said that when Lila and Julia’s grade graduated, Lila would be valedictorian. Julia couldn’t figure out what made her best friend so likeable, and it certainly didn’t rub off on her.

Lila flashed one of her famous smiles and said quietly, “Julia, after work today I need to tell- actually show- you something.”

“What?” Julia asked interestedly, her Monday morning zombie mood subsiding.

“Not now. There are people around.”

“Where?”

“The roof.”

“Of…”

“My house. Unless you’d rather it be at yours. Well, actually no. Your dad would be home. My house.”

“But won’t your parents be home?”

“No. They’re busy. You’ll see what I mean.”

Julia still wanted more information on the Something, but she quieted as Nellie, a cheerleader from the street behind Lila’s, approached. She did not notice them, as usual, and began texting.

All through school (uneventful) Julia wondered about the Something.

All through work as a waitress (the biggest thing that happened was her screwing up an elderly lady’s order) Julia wondered about the Something.

After work, Julia climbed onto the bus and wondered about the Something.

All the way back home Julia wondered about the Something.

Only when she arrived at Lila’s house did she stop wondering and start acting.

Lila slowly opened the front door as little as she could, so that Julia could barely fit, and shut it quickly without slamming. The two raced up the stairs and climbed out the window in the hallway onto the roof, one of their normal hangout spots. “OK…” Lila said. “The thing I wanted to tell you.”

Julia nodded eagerly. “I’ve been wondering about it all day.”

“You’re the first Normal Person to know. Don’t tell anyone else.”

Julia was getting slightly freaked out, but she kept quiet. “You remember learning about clouds in first grade?”

Julia nodded. “There were Nimbus and Cumulous and Cirrus… I remember.”

“There was a kind of cloud they didn’t cover.” She continued. “And not the iCloud,” before Julia could interrupt. “A special cloud. Well there’s just the one. The Howsmanian Cloud.”

Julia was puzzled, but decided to leave questions for later.

“That’s where all the magical creatures come from.”

There went Julia’s self-control. “Excuse me? Magical creatures? Are you OK?”

Lila nodded. “I’m fine. You’re a Normal Person. You don’t believe. You will… once you see. See, this Howsmanian Cloud has a monarchy. A queen, king, the works. And… I’m the princess. I’m the heir. Princess Lilac. There are loads of other creatures besides us. We aren’t well-known. But we’re called Osthers. We spread happiness and light. Shining like beacons in a dark world. And that is our problem. There are only three Osthers left. My parents and me. The world is becoming dark. You can tell. Pollution is a big problem nowadays. War is a problem. Animal cruelty. People are becoming ruder and ruder. People are committing suicide because they don’t want to be in this world anymore. These are all because there are not enough Osthers. My parents explained it to me. And Osthers can’t be in romantic relationships until age 20. It’s simply a rule, or else the Osther’s lover dies tragically. Romeo and Juliet were real. Juliet was an Osther. In this case, both died tragically, and William Shakespeare knew. He was an Insider. Someone who can see the magical world. Insiders are a sort of breed of Normal People, like golden retrievers with dogs, but Insiding is not hereditary. More of a tribe, really. But Shakespeare was one, and so are you.”

“Cool! But how… just how?”

“I should start at the beginning. Remember the Greek myth about Pandora’s Box?”

“Yeah, she was curious and she opened the box filled with bad stuff. Like… violence and hate?”

“Yep. Pandora was an Insider. The evils that escaped were disease, despair, malice, greed, old age, death, hatred, cruelty and war.”

“But old age isn’t evil! It just… happens.”

“The spirit who started it was. She was crippled and instead of dealing with it herself, she spread it to others. Anyways, Pandora was curious, could hear the spirits jailed inside her box, and opened it. There was one spirit left- Hope. Hope was an Osther, but according to legend, Pandora let her out too. The Osthers caught the spirits with the help of Hope. They jailed them in something more practical than that pithus. They put some in glass bottles, and some they chained to pumpkins- they’re dark fairies, they are very small. But War herself overthrew them. She broke out of her bottle, and the others followed. They overthrew the Osthers, and the only survivors were the descendants of Juliet Capulet. I’m a descendant of the Capulets myself. Juliet’s family- her parents, that is- did not have any more children, but her cousin… it’s a rather confusing family tree. You get the picture, my parents and I are the only Osthers left. But we need help, and lots of it. That’s why I’ve come to you. We’re going to create an army. An army of the creatures who want to help.”

At this moment, Lila’s mother came into her room. “Ready?” she asked Lila/Princess Lilac.

The princess nodded. “Come on,” she told Julia. “We’re going to Howsmania.”

The journey to Howsmania didn’t take very long.