

PART ONE



To the twins, the shattered piano was just another sign that the Monsters were out of control.

It wasn't the only sign, of course. There was the fact that the piano looked suddenly aged, even though it was brand new. There was the abundance of weeds growing up between saxophones and violins – *inside* the music store. And, most obviously, there was the massive hole in the wall.

Magpie pressed down on one of the ivory keys and summoned a horribly flat note from the piano and the bird on her shoulder ruffled its feathers in disgust. “How many do you think?” she asked her sister.

Esther was already examining the hole, running her fingers on the edges with closed eyes. “Four. Maybe five. They were pretty tightly packed so it’s hard to get a reading.”

The twins eyed each other warily. Four was a new record. Usually the Monsters liked to travel alone, occasionally they’d come across as a pair, but never four. Certainly never five. And never in daylight.

“What do you think brought so many?” asked Magpie.

“They really like music?” Esther said.

Magpie rolled her eyes. “So, you don’t know.”

“No idea,” said Esther. She frowned grimly at the gaping hole. She hated not knowing things.

“We’ll have to ask Mamie when we get back.” Magpie shouldered her backpack, turning back to the shattered, ancient-new piano. “They’re growing more powerful. They weren’t even in here long and look what they did.”

“Might just be the number of them. Still, we better find them before they do even more damage. They won’t be going unnoticed this time of day.”

Sirens wailed from outside and the girls linked arms.

“Time for us to leave,” said Magpie. “Would you mind?” she asked Esther.

Esther nodded, closing her pale blue eyes. A hum vibrated through the air, making instruments all over the room give off a discordant music. It grew until there was a pop, and the twins disappeared, leaving only a black bird which flew out through the hole in the wall and into the city.

Esther and Magpie had only been hunting Monsters for two years but they’d known about them for much longer. They belonged to an ancient line of Monster hunters, mostly women, dating back to the dark ages. History books mentioned nothing about the Buhari family and, because women had only recently become heroes in stories, they were never mentioned in the fairytale versions of history either.

Plus, the Buhari’s were generally ignored or ostracised, not because of their excellent Monster hunting abilities but because of the fact that they were also albino’s – a genetic trait handed down from one monster hunter to the next. Some said the monsters were never threatened by them because their paleness made them seem weak but the Buhari’s knew there

was much more to it than that; a family magic that made them especially skilled to deal with these monstrous strays.

Of course, there was something extra special about Esther and Magpie. They were the first twins in the line of hunters; doubly powerful when they were together.

As the twins walked through the city at dusk, the shadows lengthening, they were grateful to have each other. At home Mamie would be calling mom and dad for backup, but chances were, they wouldn't make it in time. They were all the way on the Ivory Coast training a new team to deal with the tear developing there. There were so many tears appearing lately – and so many more Monsters to contend with - that they were hardly ever home.

This job might be up to Esther and Magpie alone. They weren't afraid, as such, but things could always go wrong. People could get hurt. With this many Monsters in one place it was a possibility. It put them on edge.

Esther adjusted the gear at her side and Magpie double checked the supplies in her backpack.

“What time does the tear open?” asked Magpie, checking her watch.

“Ten. Just a couple more hours. If we can get them to stay in one place we should manage it alright. Otherwise we just open it ourselves,” said Esther.

Suddenly a young girl tore around the corner, wide-eyed and screaming.

“It's coming for me!” she screamed, not stopping for a second. She was followed by more children running, screaming.

The twins ran against the flow of kids, towards the local park and found the problem within seconds. There, in a writhing mass, were five terrifying Monsters.

Though these Monsters had been around for centuries, no one had ever been able to adequately describe them. That wasn't because they'd never caught a good look at them but because these creatures were constantly out of sync in this dimension. Their features were shifted in and out of phase, blurring and morphing so that they were always changing from one grotesque thing to another. It wasn't their fault really – their bodies did not handle the change in physics very well. Being in their present state was painful and made them particularly grumpy. Sometimes so grumpy it made them dangerous.

A black bird landed on Magpie's shoulder and twittered something softly against her ear. "Mamie's made the call for mom and dad."

Magpie eyed the writhing mass nervously. It was going to be difficult to convince this lot to move – as agitated as they'd become.

"Stop that," Esther said, reading her sister's mind. "They're not as aggressive as they look, I promise."

"Says you," came a voice from behind them.

There, at the end of the path, was a tall boy with short dark hair and equally dark eyes. He carried a crossbow in one hand. Magpie had seen that make before - it came with a special netting attachment to capture prey more easily. It would, however, be entirely useless on this particular lot of Monsters.

There were often families who thought they could handle the trade – arrogant, uncalled fools who thought themselves experts despite their lack of experience or success.

"What makes you an expert on monsters, little girl?" the boy asked as more boys emerged from the lengthening shadows. They were all tall, wide shouldered, and clad in black. On their shoulders were bold bear crests and each of them carried a weapon scarier than the next. Esther hadn't seen this lot before.

"Centuries of experience. You?" asked Magpie.

The boys seemed unimpressed. “Whatever. You aren’t needed anymore. We’ll take it from here.”

Magpie stepped forward but Esther grabbed her forearm, holding her back.

“By all means, take it away,” she said, stepping off the path to give them room to pass.

“Thanks, *freak*,” said the boy as he and his friends strutted past. “Monsters trying to take out monsters, ha!”

“Why’d you do that?” Magpie asked Esther, frowning at the backs of the boys.

“Why’d you think? A group of Monsters that large aren’t going to go down easily. Especially when you come at them with weapons. Rookies, the lot of them.”

Magpie pushed her glasses higher on her nose. “So, you’re just going to watch them get phased?”

Esther shrugged. “I’m a pacifist, Mags. It’s against my beliefs to get involved. Someone could get hurt.”

Magpie snorted and folded her arms across her chest. “If they take too long mom and dad will get here and then we won’t have to do this alone anyway. Maybe they’re doing us a favour.”

A crossbow hurtled through the air and landed at their feet as the boys began screaming and disappearing. One boy sped past them looking a hundred years old.

“Poor lads. Pity they didn’t listen to us,” said Esther.

Magpie laughed. “Pity indeed.”

“Our turn.”

The girls stepped onto the path, hands at their sides as the bird began to whistle a repeating tune. Esther joined first and soon Magpie completed the harmony. The whistling,

carefree as it was, caught the Monsters' attention and the shifting mass of shapes turned in unison.

"Are they in a talking mood?" Magpie whispered as they got closer.

"No. Containment on this one," said Esther.

Magpie nodded and pulled a thin luminous rope from her backpack. Each girl took an end and walked it around the writhing shape. Strange sounds were emerging from the shapes by this stage – horrible sounds, like screaming and howling and groaning. Esther's skin crawled, feeling every ounce of their frustration. One of them thrust out an arm – or leg – to stop them circling but as soon as it hit the string the Monster screamed and jerked the arm back.

"Sorry, big guy," said Magpie, wishing she could reach out and reassure the creature.

When they had circled the rope twice around the Monsters they joined the end and the rope lit up with a slowly pulsating light.

"Nice touch," said Esther.

"Thought the rhythm might calm them," said Magpie. "Will they be okay until ten?"

"No – they're in a lot of pain. We'll have to open a tear. Ready?" asked Esther, reaching out to take her sister's hand.

"Ready," said Magpie.

Hand in hand, facing the writhing mass with the bird paying close attention, they closed their eyes and began singing a soft chant of ancient words they knew by heart. Below the Monsters it appeared as though the ground were opening up but instead of earth and soil, the hole revealed a swirling of stars and colours.

With a unified sigh, the Monsters gladly dropped into the portal and disappeared back to their own dimension. Two rounds of the chant closed the hole and the park was empty and silent once again.

“Easy-peezy,” said Esther, dusting off her hands.

Magpie put her hands on her hips, arching her eyebrows at her sister. They weren’t done.

Esther sighed in defeat. “I know, I know. We have to go and fetch those stupid boys.”

“We can’t just leave them in an alternate dimension, Esther.”

“It’ll do them good to learn what it’s like to be the monster. Let’s see how they feel being displaced and out of sync,” said Esther, winding up the rope with more vigour than necessary.

“Or we could show them the kindness of *freaks*?” suggested Magpie.

Esther smiled reluctantly. “Fine.”

They packed up their backpacks, making sure there was no evidence of them or monsters being in the park, and then walked towards home where Mamie would help them find out which dimension the boys had been sent to.

On Magpie’s shoulder the bird twittered. “Go tell Mamie to prepare the safe tear. We’ll be there in just a minute.”

The bird fluttered off.

Magpie watched her go, feeling the tugging ache that always accompanied the bird’s leaving. She sighed. “It’s good – the work we do.”

Esther looked at her sister quizzically. Magpie’s short, tight hair had gone frizzy like it always did around Monsters and her face was flushed pink. “Sure it is. The Monsters would stay in pain if we didn’t help them back.”

“And the humans would be terrified about all the wrong things,” said Magpie.

“But?” Esther said. She could tell Magpie had more to say by the way she worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

“But it would be better if we could keep it from happening altogether. Then the Monsters wouldn’t have to go through all that pain and the humans wouldn’t have to be sad...” She sighed again. She was tired and there was still more to do – sometimes it felt like the work was never-ending. “I just wish we could close the tears altogether, you know?”

Esther looked for Magpie for a very long time before she spoke. “You know what that would mean.”

Magpie nodded, tears pricking her eyes. “Mamie would never allow it.”

“Never mind Mamie. I wouldn’t be too happy about it either.”

“But think of the suffering it would stop.”

Esther hoisted her backpack over her shoulder, shaking her head. “We’re not strong enough to contain all that energy anyway. Imagine what it would do to us.”

“Not yet. But one day. We’re the first twins – together, we might be able to do it...”

Sirens sounded a few blocks away, the sound traveling snake-like through the alleys, between tall buildings. The radio on Esther’s hip crackled something about another Monster sighting.

“Boys or Monsters? Where are we going first?” said Esther, pretending the previous conversation hadn’t happened.

“One day we’ll be forced to face it. You and I both know that,” said Magpie, wiping at her eyes. She knew the conversation was over, there was work to be done.

“Monsters then. The boys can stew a little longer. Maybe that will teach them not to interfere in things they don’t understand,” said Esther.

Magpie took a deep breath, nodding once. “Yes. Okay. Monsters then.” She held out her hand. “Ready?”

“Ready,” said Esther.

They joined hands and with a pop, disappeared from the park.

