

The
Illivinator
A Novella

by Adare Elyse

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Chapter One

“I don’t see any fairies in the fruit bowl, Violet.”

Vi started. Her pencil jerked astray over the fairy sketch’s wing.

Ms. Gray had appeared at Vi’s shoulder even faster than she could bring an image out of a blank page—and that said something. Unlike her classmates, she didn’t need a whole class period to complete a drawing of a fruit bowl, which left extra time for the fairy to wink into her imagination and out of her pencil.

The instructor raised her eyebrows over her traditional rounded-square glasses. “The assignment is a still life, meaning a realistic representation of the model in front of you.”

Vi jutted out her lip at the demure dish of pears and apples. Not even the lone banana gave the

subject matter any interest. But a fairy coming to snatch the banana—*that* made for a good picture. If the class continued like this—drab assignments with countless rules—Ms. Gray would smother every creative spark Vi had left.

“Although, I admit your rendering of the creature’s shadow appropriately indicates the apple’s curvature.” Ms. Gray put a hand to her chin above her high buttoned collar.

Vi clenched her pencil. “Does that mean I still get full points on the assignment?” She couldn’t afford any more bad grades this far into the semester.

“I can’t grade your drawing until it’s finished.”

Her fingers turned white from her grip. “It is finished.” *Except for that stray mark you made me do when you jumped out at me like a carnival zombie.*

The bell rang. The other students threw their pencil bags into backpacks and surged toward the door. Their drawings flew into Ms. Gray’s grading basket.

But the teacher’s mouth kept moving and her hand still pointed to the drawing. Vi gritted her teeth. Just like Ms. Gray to keep her after class for no reason.

“Where is your signature? An artist’s work is never finished until it is claimed with a signature, as we discussed.” The teacher winked, as if this were some special shared moment instead of needless torture.

Vi scribbled her name in the corner, the graphite digging dark into the paper’s surface. “There.”

Ms. Gray nodded. “You’ve done well with the shading study, but I’ll still have to take a point off for not following the assignment.” She scooped up the drawing and headed to her grading basket.

Vi shoved her pencil into her back pocket next to her mini sketchbook and stormed to the door.

“Remember, you can earn more points on your homework—” Ms. Gray’s voice went silent behind the slamming door and Vi’s seething thoughts.

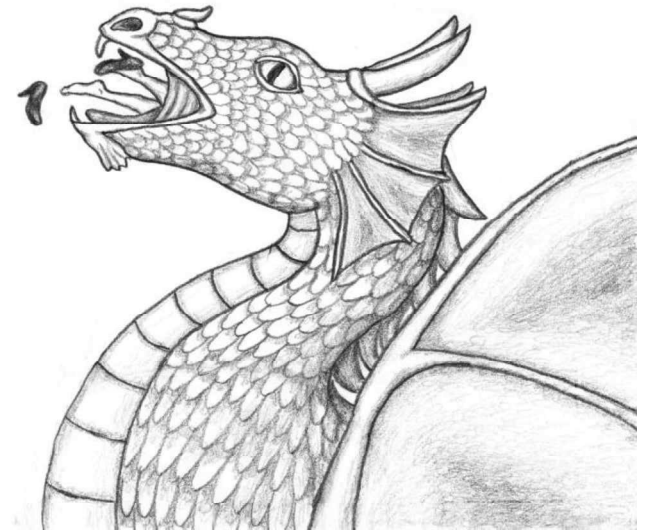
Another markdown. She’d never had to worry about grades in art class since kindergarten—but then again, she’d never had so much to prove, either. Now Ms. Gray wrecked her junior year more with each assignment, just when she needed to demonstrate that she could succeed at her art. If she couldn’t excel in a mere class, her mother would never let her pursue art as a career. Vi shuddered at the thought of getting locked into some drab accounting cubicle like her mother’s, staring at lifeless numbers until her own life trickled into nothing.

Vi didn’t bother seeking her friends in the mobs headed for the school buses and parking lot. She trudged down the sidewalk until she reached the park and aimed a kick at a stray rock on the concrete. Somehow Ms. Gray managed to suck the life even out of art, trapping her in a box of repeating what *was* instead of dreaming what *could be*. What was the point of art if not to create something new, something different?

A breeze teased a strand of her short brown hair into her face. Tossing her head, she glimpsed the sky. A cloud puffed across the cold blue like a dragon in curling smoke. The sight dissipated her worries faster than a flash of lightning. She darted for the nearest park bench and whipped out her pocket sketchbook.

The lines flew from her pencil, capturing the mythical beast the clouds hinted at. The wind stroked a couple quirked wisps of cloud out of the dragon's gaping jaws. Vi added them to her drawing as Ms. Gray's flailing legs while the beast swallowed her whole. Vi grinned at the escaping high heeled shoe and scribbled her name in the corner of the page, dotting the *I* with a sharp peck of the pencil. Served Ms. Gray right for turning creative expression into something dry and stuffy like math.

A fall breeze set a troupe of dried leaves dancing in a ring before nipping at Vi's bare knees through the holes in her jeans. Right—her homework. The thought blew away the joy of her sketch like the wind did the scattering leaves. If she didn't want to end up stuck in the accounting cubicle or traveling to sell machine parts like her dad, she'd have to turn her class performance around. And that required finding a reference picture of a building and rendering it in perfect detailed realism with an emphasis on dynamic shading. With a groan, she pushed off the park bench and marched home.





“Vi! Dinner.”

Vi dragged herself out of her desk chair to answer her mother’s call from the kitchen downstairs. Still in high heels and a dress suit, Mom offered Vi a plate of microwaved leftovers.

“Thanks.” Vi headed for the stairs, but her mom’s voice stopped her.

“How was school?”

Vi shrugged and came back to take a seat on the stool by the kitchen island. “OK.”

“OK?” Mom scooped some broccoli out of a storage bowl onto another plate. She raised an eyebrow at her daughter. “That face doesn’t look OK.”

Vi picked at her not-quite-warm-enough pot roast with her fork. “Oh, you know. Ms. Gray just likes ruining my life.”

“The art teacher?” Mom popped her dish into the microwave.

Vi nodded.

Mom leaned against the counter, her lipsticked mouth thinning. “Maybe you’re taking this whole art thing too seriously. It’s just an elective. You have other classes that are more important. Didn’t you say you have an advanced pre-calculus test coming up?”

Vi dropped her fork on her plate with a clatter. “Art *is* important.”

The microwave beeped. Mom turned to retrieve her meal. “I know you’ve always enjoyed it, but it’s hard to succeed as an artist. You need a job that will pay the bills, and frankly, art class isn’t going to help your résumé for those kinds of jobs.”

“What if I don’t want those kinds of jobs? Art is what I’m good at. It’s what I like.”

“You have to be realistic, honey. Life isn’t a fantasy where everything works out easily all the time. You need to start putting in the work toward what matters.”

Vi pushed off the stool.

Mom’s plate clinked against the counter. “Where are you going?”

“I have homework.” Vi stumped up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door shut.

Be realistic. She plopped into her swivel chair. Between people like Ms. Gray and Vi’s mom, the world seemed to have no imagination. Vi opened her laptop and sketchbook. An art career *was* realistic—so long as she passed Ms. Gray’s class. Grinding her food between her teeth, she searched for the perfect reference picture to turn her grade around.



Vi shoved her chair back from her computer with a sigh. The internet image search littered her screen with buildings, but she couldn't bring herself to draw even one of them. None captured her interest. Art could create places never visited before, invent new worlds, transport to unimagined frontiers. Vi's art opened the window to her imagination, spiriting her out of her dreary mundane world of concrete buildings and schoolbooks. Her pencil longed for magic and adventure, not rehashing what she encountered every day.

The image of a ruined cathedral snagged Vi's eye. She leaned closer to inspect the drab stones sagging under a dreary sky. What if trees took root alongside those columns? If sun sparkled diamonds into those walls? What magic might such a place hold?

Her pencil jumped into her hand. The drawing came to life with each sweep of the graphite, detailing the shafts of sunlight playing hide-and-seek with the shadows amid the crumbling stones of the ruin. The trees filled the empty place with life it had forgotten, reaching up to the roof of sky. She drew until her eyelids sagged and her fingers molded to the pencil with a dull ache. With a final flourish, she signed, "Vi," and dropped her head on the paper.



Vi woke to a tickle on her cheek. The sun burned through her closed eyelids. Her desk felt hard and rough as rock under her face. She opened her eyes with a bleary blink.

Birds chattered, making as little sense as the vision before her eyes. Saplings shot up amid stone walls. Sunlight dappled the patches of grass around the remnants of a flagstone floor. Vi brushed her cheek, dislodging a ladybug onto her hand. At least, it looked like a ladybug, except for the blue spots. She squinted at it until it loosed its wings and disappeared through the glassless arch of a window.

The place she'd drawn—somehow she must have entered it in her dreams. *I am dreaming—right?*

Vi pushed off the stone block supporting her head. Lichen crumbled under her fingers over the rock's cool, damp surface. A grin stole across her face as she stood. She'd drawn in black and white, but this place—with its vivid green leaves, golden sun, azure sky—dazzled her.

"Poppies and penners!"

Vi whirled at the voice.

A teenage boy stood in the arched doorway several yards and a few stone steps away from her. His tousled sandy brown hair came down to the collar of

the most unexpected outfit: a long-sleeved off-white shirt under a loose-fitting blue tunic with a short gray cloak on top. Between the dull colors and the worn patches on his trousers and sleeves, his outfit resembled a highly-used, low-budget theatre costume from a thrift store. His mouth gaped, and he stared at her with the same wide-eyed surprise she gave him.

His gaze dropped from her head to her toes before jerking away. He fiddled with the ties of his cloak. “Forgive me, milady, but have you been robbed?”

“What?”

“Where are your clothes?”

Vi glanced down at herself, half-expecting this to turn into one of those dreams where she’d inexplicably forgotten to put on pants. But no—she wore the same tight T-shirt and skinny jeans she’d worn to school. “These are my clothes.”

He took off his cloak and hurried down the stairs, holding out the article and staring out the empty window. “Here, put this on.”

Vi resisted both taking a step back and the cloak. It smelled the way she imagined a mud-spattered sheep might. “Uh, no thanks.”

The red on the boy’s cheeks spread to his ears. “It’s no trouble, really. You need it more than I do.”

She squinted at him.

He gave the cloak a shake, stealing glances at her from the corner of his eye between focusing out

the window. “I, uh—I didn’t mean to look at your ankles. I haven’t seen a woman wearing just her drawers before. Please pardon me.”

This is a very odd dream. She took the cloak to humor him and tied it around her middle with the opening running along her side and the hem brushing the tops of her sneakers. At least the dream had kept her shoes, too.

The boy relaxed, resuming his normal tanned complexion. “My name is Alden. What’s yours?”

“Violet. But you can call me Vi.” She almost put out her hand to shake on reflex as her businessman father always insisted, but instead she twitched it back to her side at the sight of the black stain on the boy’s fingers. He stood a few inches shorter than she did, and she’d peg him for a freshman back home.

Alden bowed his head and rose with a smile. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Vi. How did you come to be here?”

“Uh...” At this point, she expected her dream self to fabricate some ridiculous backstory or gloss over any attempt at logic by whisking off to a field of marshmallow squirrels, but neither happened.

Alden still blinked at her expectantly.

“I’m...” *Not sure.* She frowned. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I’m looking for oak galls for the Scriptorium.” He patted a bag hanging from his shoulder as if that explained everything.

“Come again?”

“Yes, I often do come this way, so I’ll likely return. But I’ve never seen anyone in the ruins before. Except in the history annals from before the Norvanlords burned it down last century.” He laughed as if he’d made a joke.

Vi still struggled to piece his speech together or even figure out her own. “No, I mean—what are you doing here?”

He raised his eyebrows. “I’m looking for oak galls. You know, to make iron gall ink for the scribes at the Scriptorium?”

Her expression scrunched. Had she fallen into some sort of medieval vision where her brain magically produced vocabulary she’d never heard?

“It’s all right. Not everyone is versed in the ways of the literate.”

“I *am* literate, thank you very much,” she huffed. Heat burned through her cheeks. Now the dream had lost its fun. Yet even as she wanted to wake, she sensed more and more strongly that she already had. . . .

“Really? Where are you from? I’ve never met a literate girl before. Excuse me, lady.”

“Lakewood.” She glanced around at this place that had supposedly come from her imagination—yet

the details of the crumbled grout at the bases of the walls, the rough spun wool of the cloak, this boy himself—it all went beyond what she had pictured.

Alden thought for a moment. “I’ve never heard of it, although I’m still early in my studies. Is it a long way from here?”

“Maybe.” She examined a bug scuttling on the wall—a green and brown beetle with a tail unlike anything she’d encountered on the internet.

“Definitely.”

“Then. . . how did you get here?” Alden shifted on his feet, back to that same question.

For the first time, a ghost of anxiety crept over her skin. “I don’t know. I fell asleep and woke up here.”

A crease drew a line between his green eyes.

“Then. . . how will you get home?”

She shivered despite the warm sun. “I don’t know.”