Myself... In Shattered Reflection

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Book 1: New Blood

Chapter 1

"Agent Roberts reporting for duty."

"Agent Shawn Roberts?"

"Yes sir."

"Drop the 'sir', I work for a living. I'm Agent Simmons, but you can call me Gary."

"Yes sir... Gary. My orders say that I'm supposed to report to you to receive my first field assignment."

"Your first, huh? Lucky me. Oh well, I suppose that no one goes through all the training to end up behind a desk. You gotta get your feet wet sometime."

Agent Roberts didn't have a response for that, so he waited anxiously to be told what to do.

"I guess this assignment makes more sense to me now that I know I'm being saddled with a rookie. The long and short of it is, we've been ordered to investigate the kidnapping of a child... let's see... here it is... his name is Devin Barnes. He disappeared from his

home in Rockport, Connecticut three weeks ago. Yesterday we received photographic evidence of him being in Columbus, Ohio."

"And a minor being transported across state lines without parental approval would make it our jurisdiction." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"That's right. What's more, it appears that the boy has been severely abused. The police officers that took the photographs weren't able to subdue the boy. He ran off into the woods and they weren't able to find him again."

"How sure are we that it was really him?"

"There's little doubt. They had him cornered for a few minutes and were able to snap several pictures of him while they were trying to talk him down."

"Were they able to gather any information about his abductors?"

"None. The boy seemed to be on his own. By all accounts, Devin seemed to be almost feral. The officers on the scene said that he didn't seem to comprehend their spoken words."

"That may indicate some type of drug being used to control the boy."

"Nothing in my reading of the report raised any red flags about that with me, but you can read over the reports for yourself on the way and maybe you can spot something."

"On the way to where?"

"Columbus, Ohio."

"When are we leaving?"

"Just as soon as you stop asking questions."

"You mean that we're leaving *right now*?"

"Now I see how you made it into the FBI, with deductive reasoning skills like that." Agent Simmons chuckled.

"Will I have time to go back to my apartment and pack something?"

"Sure, if you don't mind taking a later flight. Of course, I'm going on ahead while there's still a chance of finding that missing boy."

"That's okay. I'll find a way to manage. The job comes first."

"A piece of advice, Rookie. Always keep a bugout bag with you, ready to go. When we get called out, it usually isn't for high tea. Most of the time it's for something dirty, dangerous and extremely time-sensitive."

"I'll remember that."

"Good. Come on. They won't hold the flight for us."

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"From what I'm reading here, I'm not seeing a motive for a kidnapping. The parents aren't particularly wealthy and there hasn't been any ransom note." Agent Roberts said once their plane had taken to the air.

"It could just be some pervert who likes to bugger little boys."

"Then why would his captors let the boy go out on his own?"

"Maybe he escaped."

"But if that were the case, why wouldn't he accept help from the police?"

"Trauma, maybe. Or it could be that the boy was raised to be afraid of, or even to hate the police. That's not too uncommon nowadays."

"I suppose that could be it. I've seen plenty of examples of people demonizing the police and yet who do they call at the first sign of trouble? It makes no sense."

"If you want to deal with people who make sense, you're in the wrong line of work."

"Wait. What's this? According to the Rockport investigation, Devin had made mention of being 'stalked' before his disappearance."

"Yes. If not for that, this probably would have been treated as a 'runaway' situation."

"The look in his eyes. He doesn't even look human anymore."

"Those pictures are haunting, aren't they?"

"They're horrifying. How could a sweet looking kid from a middle class neighborhood in Connecticut all of a sudden be transformed into an animal like this?"

"Another thing to consider is disease. Although that wouldn't account for the supposed abduction, it might be able to explain such a radical change in his personality."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Rabies... or some other communicable disease that can cause the victim to lose higher brain function."

"I can't say that I've ever studied much about anything like that."

"Like I said, it doesn't help to explain the abduction, so it's not likely to be relevant. Even so, at this stage of things we can brainstorm the possibilities so that we're more likely to spot evidence to support one of our crackpot theories."

"Do you know if anyone has followed up on the 'stalker'?"

"So far, all we've been able to come up with is the testimony of the few people that Devin mentioned it to. There hasn't been any evidence to suggest that there even *was* a stalker. I suppose that another possibility might be mental illness. Devin might have been experiencing paranoia and was seeing a 'stalker' as a symptom of his decline into madness."

"That might be worth investigating. It fits in with the established facts. But if it were mental illness, there should have been warning signs before he went off the deep end like this. Something this severe doesn't typically manifest overnight."

"I'm going to put in a request to the investigators in Connecticut to inquire further about Devin's mental state prior to his disappearance. It could give us a clue as to whether we might be dealing with drug addiction, mental illness or something else."

"What will we be doing when we land? I'm guessing that we won't have time to go to a hotel and get settled in."

"We're going to be met at the airport by Agent Abernathy from the local field office. We'll be filled in on any new leads or developments and carry on from that point."

"Why are we being flown in if they already have local agents?"

"It comes down to specialization and experience. I'm sure that the Columbus agents are perfectly competent and qualified to investigate several different types of routine incidents. But apparently this is something far enough outside their area of expertise that they feel it's better to call in someone who's encountered such situations before."

"So do you mostly get called in on kidnapping cases?"

"No." Gary said simply and seemed to consider his choice of words carefully before continuing, "Some cases require you to 'think outside the box'. Whatever this is doesn't appear to be motivated by greed or politics. There's no indication of a relationship having been established that would make this 'a crime of passion' or anything like that."

"So you were called in because there's no clear motivation?"

"It's not just that. In this instance, there's no tangible evidence that a crime has even been committed. We know that Devin went

missing, but we can't definitively say that he was abducted. That's an assumption on our part."

"I think I get it. This is so open ended that the investigation could take off in any direction. So rather than burden the local office with something that might grow out of control, they bring us in to focus on this case to the exclusion of everything else going on."

"Yes. Something like that. Although we will depend on Agent Abernathy to fill us in on any local cases that might share common threads with Devin's case."

"What do you think the chances are that we'll be able to return Devin to his family, safe and sound?"

"Listen, Rookie. Sometimes you just have to content yourself with finding the answer."

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"Agent Simmons, Agent Roberts? I'm Agent Willem Abernathy. Welcome to Columbus."

"Thank you. Have there been any new developments in the case in the past few hours?"

"Possibly. There have been reports of missing pets near the area where we encountered the boy. That might be related."

"We haven't considered the possibility of cult activity. That might be worth looking into." Shawn said thoughtfully.

Agent Simmons nodded, then asked, "Agent Abernathy, could you possibly get us information about known cults and recent cult activity in the area?"

"That might take some doing. Although we haven't been able to pin anything down, there have been rumors of a secret society operating in Columbus for decades."

"It's unlikely that anything that well established could be responsible for Devin's disappearance. I have a feeling that what we're looking for is a bit more 'ragtag'."

"I'll ask around and see what I can uncover for you."

"Where are we going first?"

"I thought that you'd want to see the site where the pictures were taken. Maybe you'll be able to spot something that we didn't know to look for."

"I don't know about that, but I guess it's a place to start."

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"Okay. Give me the history. How did you find out that the boy was here?"

"One of the residents spotted him digging through garbage cans and called the local police. As a matter of course, they forwarded the photographs that they took to us and our computer was able to make a match."

"When the boy escaped, where did he go?"

"Over there, into the park."

"Did they pursue him?"

"Yes, for a few minutes, anyway. The thing is, they didn't have any idea that he was anything other than a typical homeless youth at that point. When they lost track of him in a heavily wooded area, they broke off their chase, resigned to the fact that he would turn up eventually... one way or another."

"Is that your way of saying dead or alive?"

"Yes. That's what I'm saying."

"That's life in the big city, Rookie. Homeless people die. Sometimes they're kids. We don't have to like it, but we *do* have to accept it, or we won't be able to focus on doing our jobs."

"Is there a large homeless population residing in the park?"

"No. It's a little too rustic for most of them. Actually, the homeless tend to steer clear of this area."

"Do we have time for me to have a look around?"

"Don't get too full of yourself, Rookie. Don't be thinking that you know it all."

"Do you have a more productive strategy in mind?"

"Yes. I'm getting familiar with the background so that I can determine what still needs to be investigated."

"That sounds like a good plan. While you're doing that, I'll be here, walking around the park looking for leads. Call me on my cell when you're done."

"You seem to be awfully sure of yourself all of a sudden."

"Am I a member of this team or your personal assistant, following you around, waiting on you to tell me what to do?"

"Well, to be honest, I expected for you to tag along behind me for at least a few weeks, absorbing my 'pearls of wisdom', but then I'd be forced to kick you out of the nest so that you could try to become your own person." Gary said frankly, then added, "Let's give this a try. If it ends up not working out, there's still plenty of room in the nest."

"I'll remember that." Agent Roberts said with a smile, then thought to ask, "Do you have my cell number?"

"Yeah. It was included in your assignment paperwork. You got mine?"

"Yes. I made sure to add it to my contact list before I reported for duty."

"Fine. Call if you run into any trouble."

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Agent Roberts was startled by the sound of his cell phone ringing.

"Hello?" He answered unsteadily as he put the phone to his ear.

"I finished going over the local cult activity with Agent Abernathy and I thought that I'd check in with you. Have you been able to come up with anything?"

"I don't know."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Rookie. There may not be anything to find."

"The last thing I remember was being in the parking lot talking to you and Agent Abernathy. I snapped out of it just now when my phone rang. Now I'm in a restaurant... somewhere."

"Are you saying that you don't remember anything that happened to you in the past three hours?"

"I guess so. I can't be sure about anything at the moment. I'm still a little out of it, like I just woke up from a deep sleep."

"Give me your location and I'll take you to a doctor."

"No. Except for the gaping hole in my memory, I think that I'm fine."

"We'll need to do a comprehensive drug test to try to account for your missing memories."

"I haven't had anything to eat or drink since I arrived in Columbus so it seems highly unlikely that I could have been drugged."

"This doesn't have anything to do with uncovering the truth. This is about covering your ass and eliminating alternative explanations."

"Fine. Give me a second." Shawn said into the phone, then he could be heard saying more distantly, "Excuse me, but I need to call for a ride. Can you tell me where this is?"

Agent Simmons couldn't hear the response, but a moment later Shawn said into the phone, "I'm at the White Castle on Alum Creek Drive."

"Hold on. I need to be sure that Abernathy knows where that is." Agent Simmons said seriously.

Shawn waited anxiously, and noticed that he had empty food wrappers and a beverage container on the table before him.

"She knows where it is, but she wants to know how you got all the way out there."

"I'd like to know that too. I'm going to do a little investigating while I wait for you to show up."

"Be careful, Rookie. Don't make the mistake of assuming that things are what they appear to be. It's possible that you're being set up to 'discover' something."

"I'll keep my eyes open. Ring me when you get here."

"Will do."

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"Excuse me. Do you have a minute? I need to ask you a question."

"I got me a old man at home an two babies. Ain't gonna happen." The cashier said flatly. She was wearing a name badge that said 'Cheryl' and a weary expression.

"No. It's nothing like that. I just wondered if you were here when I came in."

"Yeah. I guess so. I been here since eleven."

"Did you see if I came in with anyone else? You see, I can't remember. I just woke up here." Shawn quietly explained.

"Got roofied, huh? I'm guessin you came in with the lunch rush. I got no idea if you came in with someone else. First I noticed, you was sittin over there munching your fries."

"So you don't remember if I ordered the food I was eating?"

"Listen, I see maybe two hundred people in the space of an hour during lunch rush. Don't ask me to remember any one of 'em."

"Do you think anyone else might have noticed?"

"Prolly not. I got the best view of the dining room from the register." Cheryl said simply, then added more firmly, "If you'll excuse me, these nice folks behind you look hungry and they prolly don't have all the time in the world to be waiting on you."

"Yes. Of course. But please ask around to see if anyone might have seen me come in or how I got here."

"I'll do what I can." Cheryl responded, then looked past Agent Roberts and said, "Welcome to White Castle. What can I get for you today?"

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Shawn went back to the table where he had awakened and looked at the opposing seat to see if there was any indication that someone might have been sitting with him.

Nothing immediately caught his eye, so he opened his drink container and carefully sniffed to see if he could detect anything out of the ordinary that might have been added to it.

Again, there wasn't anything obvious, but he resolved himself to taking the drink container with him so that it could also be tested.

After taking his seat again, he surreptitiously looked around the dining room to see if anyone appeared to be watching him, either

having recognized his predicament or possibly to observe their handiwork.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying their meals and paying no attention to him whatsoever.

"Man, I axed around in the back and no one saw nothin." Cheryl said as she approached his table.

"Thanks for checking. I appreciate it." Shawn said sincerely.

"Did they get your money or anything?"

Shawn took out his wallet and quickly verified its contents before saying, "No. In fact, whoever did this to me must have paid for my meal because every bit of my money's still here."

"They roofied you up and didn't even take your money? All I can figure is that you musta been sperm-jacked. All dressed up in that suit like that, it wouldn't surprise me. You prolly a good catch. Don't be surprised if in a month or two some bitch shows up an says you gone be a daddy."

Shawn's eyes went wide at the suggestion.

"Breaks over. Good luck, Baby Daddy." Cheryl said with a sympathetic grin at him before returning to the kitchen.

Shawn looked back at the table and fought harder than ever to try and retrieve some sort of memory of what had happened in the past three hours.

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"How you doing, Rookie?" Agent Simmons asked as Shawn got into the car.

"I'm about as freaked out as I've ever been." Shawn said honestly.

"Abernathy's going to drive us to the hospital now. Have you remembered anything?"

"No. It's like those hours of my life were completely edited out."

"Well, the good news is that there haven't been any reports of a bank robbery or a shooting spree during that time frame, so at least you don't have to worry about that."

"Good to know. I hadn't really thought about it, but it *is* possible that I could have done something illegal during that time."

"We'll worry about that if the time comes. For now, let's just focus on what we know and what we can verify with evidence and facts."

"We know that I was at the location by the park. We know that three hours later I was at the White Castle. I don't know where to begin with what happened in between."

"The drug test may provide some answers."

"I brought my drink from White Castle, just in case they slipped me something in there."

"Seems unlikely, but it's worth checking."

"Hold on. Incoming message." Agent Abernathy said from the driver's seat as she put a hand to her earpiece and said, "Abernathy here. Go ahead."

Gary and Shawn went silent and waited.

"Acknowledged. Secure the scene and we'll be there as quickly as we can."

There was another long silent moment as Agent Abernathy touched her earpiece again, then she said, "Police report an abandoned car with Connecticut plates located in Reynoldsburg. They're securing the scene and will wait for us to arrive."

"Any word on the owner of the car?"

"It was reported stolen three weeks ago. As soon as local FBI operatives arrive on the scene, they'll start working on trying to

trace the car back using traffic cameras and other video surveillance."

"Good. With any luck, the driver will have stopped at an ATM somewhere along the way."

"The hospital's up ahead. Why don't I drop you two there and continue on to the scene?" Agent Abernathy asked seriously.

"I'm a big boy. I don't need for someone to hold my hand. Why don't you two go on ahead and I'll call when I'm done with the blood test?"

"No can do. If anything comes of the blood test, we're going to need corroborating testimony about how the samples were collected. I can't say that me being there will help our case, but me *not* being there will only open us up to another avenue to have our findings questioned." Agent Simmons said frankly.

Shawn didn't dispute the senior agent's words and waited as Agent Abernathy pulled to a stop by the hospital entrance.

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Walking into the hospital, Shawn was dreading what was to come.

"They should be expecting us. I called ahead." Agent Simmons assured him.

As they walked to the main reception area, Gary took the lead and said, "We're Agents Roberts and Simmons from the FBI. I was told that there would be someone here to expedite the process of gathering blood samples."

"Yes sir. We have someone on the way, he should be here any minute. If you'll please take this paperwork and fill it out, he should be here before you're finished."

Shawn inwardly groaned at the chore before him, but understood the necessity of it.

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"Agents Simmons and Roberts?" A pleasant looking man asked as he walked into the waiting area.

"Yes. Over here." Agent Simmons said as Shawn continued to answer a variety of health related questions.

"I'm Dr. Raphael Killian, I was called in to personally oversee your testing. Before we begin, I'd just like to know what it is that we're looking for."

"Something unusual happened to Agent Simmons. If it's possible, we'd like to find out if it's somehow drug related."

"I assume that you're not talking about recreational use." Dr. Killian said in a leading tone.

"No. Agent Roberts and I were together, about four hours ago and everything was fine. When we parted company to investigate separately, something happened and the next thing he knew, he was in a White Castle, several miles away, three hours later. He has no memory of how he got there."

"White Castle?" Dr. Killian asked cautiously.

"Yeah. The one on Alum Creek Drive. Is that significant?" Agent Simmons asked hopefully.

"No. I just haven't had lunch and... never mind. Are you just about done with the paperwork?"

"Is it ever *completely* done? It seems like the more I do, the more there is to do."

"Yes. That *is* one of the mysteries of the universe." Dr. Killian said with an understanding smile, then continued, "You can bring the clipboard with you. We need to get this started."

"I brought this drink from White Castle. Could you test it to see if anything's been added to it?"

"Yes, of course. The sooner we get this started, the sooner we'll be finished."

Shawn was only too happy to comply.

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Agent Simmons watched as Dr. Killian walked around the treatment room, gathering what he would need to perform the blood tests.

"Tell me, Agent Roberts, how are you feeling? Do you have a headache?"

"No."

"A stiff neck or aching joints?"

"No."

"What about classic flu symptoms?"

"No. Except for being freaked out by what just happened to me, I'm fine."

"You know, in the past, when someone needed a blood test done, I'd usually get a phlebotomist or at most, a nurse, taking care of it. I don't think I've ever had an actual 'doctor' perform the blood tests before." Agent Simmons said thoughtfully.

"I normally wouldn't be called in. I'm an expert in infectious diseases and immunology and I sometimes collaborate with the CDC on certain cases. I was in my office when the call came in about an FBI agent needing a drug screening and it set off some alarms with the hospital staff, so they called me." Dr. Killian said to Agent Simmons, then turned to Agent Roberts and said, "Please take off your jacket and roll up your sleeve."

"Why would a drug screening cause them to call you?" Agent Simmons asked suspiciously.

"We've had cases that appeared on the surface to be drug related that ended up being biological in nature. The staff here know to call me when something doesn't sound right to them. When I'm called, I decide if I'll investigate it personally or not." Dr. Killian said as he swabbed the crook of Shawn's arm.

"So you think that this could be something viral?" Agent Simmons asked carefully.

"Not necessarily, but it would be foolish to dismiss the possibility when we can prove or disprove the notion with a simple blood test at this early stage of things." Dr. Killian said to Agent Simmons, then turned his attention to Agent Roberts and quietly said, "This will sting, just for a second."

Agent Roberts was surprised to realize that he barely felt the needle at all. Dr. Killian had a gentle touch and obviously had enough experience to have 'perfected' the art of drawing blood.

"So if it's viral, what are we looking at?" Agent Simmons asked cautiously.

"The first thing that comes to mind is Naegleria Fowleri, also known as Brain Eating Amoeba." Dr. Killian said frankly, then hurriedly continued, "I'm not saying that that's what we're dealing with here. In fact, that's very unlikely. But the complete loss of memory for a specific period of time automatically makes me think of something like that."

Agents Simmons and Roberts were silent as they watched Dr. Killian carefully apply a printed label to the vial of blood that he had drawn.

"Something's eating my brain?" Agent Roberts finally asked.

"No. Almost certainly not. But it's possible that something's been introduced into your system that mimics that aspect of the disease. Will you disrobe for me?"

"Excuse me?" Agent Roberts asked uneasily.

"I need to do a visual survey to rule out any animal or insect bites. It won't take but a minute."

"Nothing's bitten me." Shawn immediately defended.

"Not that you know of. But what about during that missing period of time? It would be irresponsible of me to take you at your word and it will just take a minute to rule out the possibility."

"If something did bite me, does that make the brain eating thing more or less likely?" Shawn quietly asked as he began to undress.

"More, especially if it's an animal bite."

"So you're worried that it might be something like rabies?" Agent Simmons asked carefully.

"Yes. I suppose so. The transmission vector would essentially be the same and some of the symptomology might be similar."

"Is there something going around like that, because if there is, I haven't heard anything about it." Agent Simmons asked cautiously.

"All it takes is one little mutation for something that was once benign to become deadly. In my line of work, I'm reminded every day of how little it takes for a devastating disease to come into being. That's why I'm here, to try and catch the early 'first' cases before they can spread unchecked throughout the world."

"Do you think that's what we have here?" Shawn asked as he sat down to take off his shoes.

"Let me have a look at you, then I'll be in a much better position to answer." Dr. Killian said seriously, then thought to ask, "You haven't noticed any indication of recent sexual activity, have you?"

"No. But the cashier at White Castle suggested that I might have been roofied and sperm-jacked while I was unconscious. Do you think that's what happened to me?" Agent Roberts asked uneasily as he pulled down his pants.

"Not really. I'm just asking because it's another transmission vector to investigate." Dr. Killian said assuringly, then hesitantly asked, "So you haven't noticed any indication of anal penetration?"

"No! Why would you even think that?" Shawn asked with surprise.

"Again, I'm just trying to rule out transmission vectors."

"Are you saying that someone might have knocked me out and raped me while I was unconscious?"

"I'm saying that it happens. But if it were something like that, you'd know it. The type of person who'd drug you and rape you isn't likely to be gentle about it."

"I guess not."

"All of it." Dr. Killian said as he gestured toward Shawn's boxer shorts.

Shawn glanced at Agent Simmons uncomfortably, then pulled down his shorts in one quick move.

Dr. Killian was silent as he carefully examined Shawn's naked body.

Agents Simmons and Roberts both waited anxiously as the doctor conducted his investigation.

"Good. You can get dressed. There's no indication that you were bitten either by an insect or an animal." Dr. Killian said as he made a note on his clipboard.

"So, is that it? Have you checked everything out?" Shawn asked as he began to dress.

"All that's left is to look at the results of your blood tests and the test on your drink. That could take several hours."

"Doctor, based on what you've seen so far, have you found any indication of what we might be dealing with? Even if it's not based on empirical evidence, it might give us a place to start looking."

"No. All I can do at this point is try to eliminate as many possibilities as I can. Once that's done, we can look at what's left."

"We'll be waiting for your findings. Will you forward the results to the local FBI office?"

"That depends on what they are. If I don't find anything of concern, I'll forward the report. Otherwise I'll contact you directly regarding further tests or questions that I might have."

"Do you have our contact information?" Agent Simmons thought to ask.

"I have Agent Roberts' cell number on the paperwork he just filled out, if you'd like to write your number down, I'll consider you a secondary contact."

Agent Simmons did so, then watched as the doctor left.

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"I just texted Abernathy and she said that she'll be here in a few minutes. How about we have her take us to a decent hotel so you can take some time to collect yourself?"

"Are you kidding me? I want to go back to that park and try to figure out what happened to me! Three hours of my life were stolen from me and I want them back."

"That may not be such a good idea, considering what's already been done to you."

"Listen, the way I see it, I must have stumbled onto something really big for such a drastic thing to have happened to me. We're on the right track. We've got to be. Let's not squander this opportunity."

"You're attributing a lot of meaning to a missing period of time."

"Am I wrong? Doesn't this just *scream* to be explored and investigated?"

"You *may* be onto something. We'll go... together... and investigate."

Chapter 2

"Did you find anything out?" Agent Abernathy asked as they pulled away.

"Only that your local health care system seems to take things a lot more seriously than other places that I've been. Instead of a nurse or a lab worker, we were helped by a doctor, a *specialist*, and he seemed to be really on top of things." Agent Simmons responded seriously.

"How are you holding up, Roberts?" Agent Abernathy asked as she glanced at him in her rearview mirror.

"Don't worry about me. I'm not going to wimp out. I was all about figuring this out before, but now it's *personal*."

"Good for you. Just don't let your determination get in the way of your professionalism. Remember that whatever you do, you're going to have to be able to defend your actions after the fact." Agent Abernathy said seriously.

"Good advice. Be sure to keep everything on the up-and-up so that whatever actions you take can't be called into question." Agent Simmons added.

"I'm not going to go rogue. Let's just say that I'm uniquely motivated to get to the bottom of this."

"Good. Then listen up. We've been able to come up with some information about local cult activity. At this point I can't say that it's related to our case at all, but you need to hear this so we can all be on the lookout for any signs of it."

"Sounds serious. What are we talking about?"

"Apparently, it's been going on for decades." Agent Abernathy said slowly, then continued, "Every now and then some kind of 'death cult' will rise up and cause all kinds of trouble for a while. The

strange thing is, just as suddenly as they arrive, they also seem to disappear."

"The Autumn People."

"What's that?"

"Nothing. It's just something from a kid's story that I read once."

"No. Please go on. If it bears any resemblance to this case, then I'd like to hear about it."

"The Autumn People, the hungry ones, they appear each generation to feed on our nightmares and delight in our pain."

"I think I'd better be keeping a closer watch on what my kids are reading." Agent Abernathy said slowly.

"The thing that made me think of them is the way they blow into town on an autumn wind and cause all kinds of trouble, and then before anyone can realize what they're doing, they disappear, leaving only misery in their wake."

"Roberts, if I ever invite you over to my house, you are *not* to tell stories to my grandkids." Agent Simmons said firmly.

"All I'm saying is that the timing of your 'cult activity' sounds to be like the story of the Autumn People." Agent Roberts explained, then cautiously asked, "How long has it been since the last report of that type of activity?"

"It's only been three years."

"What was the previous incident like?"

"I wasn't with the bureau then, but according to the reports, there was about a five hundred percent increase in criminal activity of all kinds within a matter of days. Most of the perpetrators seemed to be from out of town, but none of them were ever arrested. There were some horrifying incidents of arson, vandalism and brutal random violence, but the perpetrators were always gone before

police arrived. No one at the scene could identify any of them, they all stated that they'd never seen them before."

"How did it end?" Agent Simmons asked cautiously.

"Just like he said, all of a sudden, everyone was standing around wondering what the hell had just happened. It was just... over."

"If I remember the story correctly, those that had fallen into the Autumn Peoples' traps were condemned to leave with them, never to be seen again."

"Seriously. You read some fucked up shit as a kid." Agent Simmons said uneasily.

"I know it's just a story, but I'm still going to count it as one more reason to keep pressing forward. We've got to rescue Devin. If we're caught in something that could suddenly end at any moment, we're his only chance."

"I guess it's time to see if it's all talk." Agent Abernathy said as she pulled the car to a stop. "We're here."

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"Do you want to come back for us?" Agent Simmons asked as he and Agent Roberts got out of the car.

"No. I've already called my husband and let him know that I'm going to be late. I'm going with you." Agent Abernathy said firmly.

"Glad to have you along." Agent Simmons said as he waited for her to join them.

"Where do we start?" Shawn asked nervously.

"When we left you before, you were walking toward that park entrance." Agent Abernathy said as she gestured toward a path which led into the wooded area.

"It's going to be dark soon. Will we need flashlights?" Shawn thought to ask.

"Actually, that might be a good idea. I've got some in the trunk." Agent Abernathy said as she doubled back to the car.

The others followed and were surprised to find just how 'well stocked' the trunk of her car was.

"I've got my sidearm, but do you think that we might need a little more 'stopping power'?" Agent Simmons cautiously asked.

"I'd rather carry it and not need it than need it and not have it." Abernathy said as she automatically handed guns to her companions.

"Aren't these illegal?" Shawn asked as he examined the weapon in his hand.

"Not for us, they're not." Abernathy said simply, then handed him extra clips.

Shawn loaded a clip, then checked to see that his flashlight was functioning properly.

"Let's do this before we lose the light." Agent Simmons finally said, then started leading the way.

"Do you want for me to call in a few more agents to help us with the search?" Agent Abernathy asked as she followed.

"Let's wait until we actually *find* something before we do anything like that. So far, all we know is that a boy who disappeared from Connecticut was spotted here. Until we can show that he or his captors are still here, there's no point in us calling for more manpower." Agent Simmons said as he slowly walked toward the treeline, carefully taking in every detail.

"What about the stuff that happened to me?" Shawn asked cautiously.

"There's no proof that that's in any way related to what we're looking for."

As they entered the wooded area, Shawn could see that the trail seemed to branch off in two directions.

"Which way do you want to go?" Abernathy asked cautiously.

"It looks like the left path will take us to another entrance. Let's go right." Simmons said decisively.

Although Shawn was in the habit of second-guessing decisions and questioning authority, he was more than happy to allow Agent Simmons to take the lead in this investigation.

* * * * *

"Abernathy, did you notice the reports of missing pets being in any particular area?" Agent Simmons asked as they slowly walked.

"No. There was no pattern that I could see. They were all just in close proximity to the park."

"So it's possible that whoever has Devin is catching and killing house pets. Animal cruelty is a common theme in the histories of most of the mass murderers and serial killers of the modern age." Agent Simmons said slowly.

"Or they could be catching them for food." Shawn interjected.

"What's that?" Agent Abernathy asked curiously.

"We've assumed that they're catching and killing pets as either some kind of religious rite or to get their psychopathic jollies. But what if they're just hungry?" Shawn asked uncomfortably.

"The police report *did* say that Devin was found looking through garbage cans." Agent Abernathy said slowly.

"It makes more sense than just about anything else in this case." Agent Simmons added.

"Maybe if we brought some food, we might be able to lure them out." Shawn said thoughtfully.

"Depending on what we find tonight, we may consider that our next step." Agent Simmons said decisively.

"What's that?" Agent Abernathy asked suddenly.

"What did you see?" Agent Simmons asked as he followed her gaze.

"A light, over there, to the right, close to the ground." She said as she took slow careful steps in that direction.

Suddenly, all around them, small discreet lights lit up along the path.

"This park isn't quite as 'rustic' as I was led to believe." Agent Simmons said as he relaxed.

"No. This is actually kind of nice... well, except for the pet killing, kidnapping psychopath who seems to be living here."

"Well, you can't have everything." Agent Simmons said with a grin.

"Wait. If the park is lit up at night and is in such a central city location, why don't the homeless people live here?" Shawn asked cautiously.

"I had been assuming that it was because it was so rugged. But now that you mention it, I can't think of any reason that this wouldn't be an attractive location for them." Agent Abernathy said thoughtfully.

"Can you recall any incidents involving this park in the recent past?"

"Nothing comes to mind. There's always something going on in the downtown area, but the park... you'd expect for it to have higher than average crime statistics. Parks typically do." Agent Abernathy said in realization.

"So, is our kidnapper part of what's going on here or is he intruding on something that's always been here?" Agent Roberts asked thoughtfully.

"Are you suggesting that there's something or someone keeping order in this park that is completely separate from the authorities?" Agent Simmons asked cautiously.

"Yes. That's *exactly* what I'm suggesting. This park is well lit, reasonably maintained, has public restroom facilities and even running water, and yet the homeless population seem to avoid it like the plague. I don't think it's too farfetched to suggest that something's going on here." Agent Roberts said reasonably.

"Okay. If we carry that line of reasoning further, then I suppose that the kidnapper is most likely not here by invitation. His presence would seem to go against the status quo that has been maintained here. It's likely that he arrived in town with his victim and found this perfectly lovely location not being used by anyone else, so he claimed it for his own."

Agent Abernathy nodded, then carefully added, "If that were the case, then there might be some counter-force also searching for the kidnapper, since he broke the sanctity or whatever it is that keeps this place from being a drug-infested crime-ridden hellhole."

Both agents looked at her with surprise.

"Walk around downtown for a few minutes, you'll understand." Willem assured them.

"Okay, again, just for the sake of argument, let's assume that there is a counter-force at work. How likely do you think it is that Agent Roberts encountered the counter-force rather than the kidnapper?" Agent Simmons asked carefully.

"I'd say that it's almost a certainty. If our kidnapper is eating pets and garbage, he's probably not in a position to be wiping out people's memories." Agent Abernathy said frankly.

"So it follows that by us being here, we're not only looking for the kidnapper and his victim, but also the regulating force that maintains a state of peace in this area." Agent Simmons said thoughtfully.

"You shouldn't be here."

All three agents looked up suddenly and were surprised to find a skinny young man, barely more than a teenager, standing before them wearing jeans and a black hoodie.

"We're FBI agents and we're here investigating the disappearance of a young man. He's been spotted in this area." Agent Simmons said professionally.

Agent Abernathy stepped forward and held out her phone with a picture of Devin displayed.

"Have you seen this boy?"

"No. I haven't. But it's really not a good idea for you to be out here after dark. Investigate all you want during the light of day, but it's not safe for you out here at night."

"It's not safe for *us*? But it's safe for *you*?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Listen. I'll leave if you will. Just please, you've got to go right now." The boy urged.

"What's your name, young man?" Agent Simmons asked authoritatively.

"Lane Kingston. Can we go now?" Lane urged.

"What are you so afraid of?" Agent Abernathy asked curiously.

Lane froze in thought for a moment, then carefully said, "I know about Devin. Okay? The guy who went rogue and took him, he's already been dealt with. You don't have to worry about him. But right now we've got... people on the way here. They're going to help us catch Devin and see that he gets all the help that he needs. The thing is, if they catch you here it's going to turn into a really big mess. *All you've got to do is walk away right now and forget that you ever met me.*"

"C'mon Rookie. There's nothing to see here. Let's call it a night." Agent Simmons said simply.

"I'll drive you to a hotel so you guys can get set up. That way we'll be able to start fresh in the morning."

Agent Roberts looked at Lane apprehensively and quietly asked, "What did you do to them?"

"I'm just trying to help them by getting them out of the way of something dangerous. *Why don't you go with them*?" Lane asked as he looked deeply into Agent Roberts' eyes.

"You comin?" Agent Simmons asked insistently.

Shawn very nearly answered 'yes', but something within him fought against the compulsion and instead he answered, "Can I call you when I'm finished here?"

"Agent Abernathy is about to go off duty, so I'm going to get her to take me to get a rental car. Call me when you're done here."

"Will do." Shawn answered as he searched Agent Simmons' expression for any indication that he was aware of what was going on.

Agents Simmons and Abernathy turned around and walked down the path, back the way they came, without a care in the world as Agent Roberts watched them go.

"You should have gone with them." Lane said honestly.

"Maybe. But it was more important to me to learn the truth." Agent Roberts said frankly, then hesitantly asked, "What you just did to them, is that the same thing you did to me this afternoon?"

"Come on. We need to get moving. Devin's not in this area." Lane said as he indicated the path before them.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Agent Roberts persisted.

"You never would have known that anything was off if you'd been from Columbus. I could have just told you to forget about me and to go somewhere safe and everything would have been fine."

"But since I'm not from here, I wouldn't know where a safe place might be."

"Right. And with you being totally out of it, I couldn't just leave you on your own. I had to take you somewhere that I knew that no one would mess with you."

"So you took me to White Castle?"

"Yeah. If anyone tried to mess with you there, the entire dining room of customers would kick their asses. You'll never meet better, more down-to-earth people than White Castle customers."

"If you say so..."

"Shawn, what I'm trying to get at is that I didn't want for you to be hurt. I don't want for anyone to be hurt. If you'll let us do our work and resolve this, then everything can go back to normal."

"Who *are* you?"

"Lane Kingston."

"*What* are you?"

"That's a little more complicated. For now, let's just say that I'm one of the good guys and leave it at that."

* * * * *

They walked in silence for a few minutes until Agent Roberts quietly asked, "You could have made me leave and forget again if you wanted to, couldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you?"

"You remember when I said that I didn't want to hurt anyone?"

"Yeah."

"Every time I enthrall you and cause you to forget, it causes damage to your psyche. Conflicts arise in your subconscious that can eventually manifest in some fairly disturbing ways."

"Would wiping my memory *two* times cause that?"

"Probably not. But the way I enthralled your group was kind of a test for you. If you would have been capable of accepting my command and dropping the investigation, you would have left with the others. But since you're so tenacious, you were able to break the thrall and see through it."

"So that's it? You're just going to tell me everything that's going on?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"For now. If all goes well, everything will get resolved, then we'll be able to enthrall you again and your subconscious will be at peace with it."

"And if all *doesn't* go well?"

"Then we'll do what we have to do to protect ourselves." Lane said simply.

"Who is *we*?"

"That's another long story. I'm not going to tell you everything, mostly because you don't need to know. But what it comes down to is that there's this... disease, I guess. Those of us who have it have some... super powers. It feels really wrong to describe it that way, but it's close enough for what we're doing right now."

"What kind of super powers?"

"Well, you've already encountered the thrall. That's kind of like hypnosis. We also have improved strength, speed, hearing, eyesight... the list goes on, but you get the idea."

"Okay. So you're super people. What does that have to do with what we're doing right now?"

"Good question. Before I can get into that, you need to know that we're very careful that Brightsiders don't find out about us..."

"Brightsiders?"

"People like you. Along with our super powers come some super limitations. The biggest one is that Shadesiders can't go out in direct sunlight. Brightsiders can go into the light. Shadesiders can go *near* the light. And Darksiders despise the light and want to destroy it."

"I take it that you're speaking metaphorically, to some degree."

"Yeah. I do that sometimes. But we've gotten off track. We try to keep Brightsiders from finding out about us. That works out fine for the most part, but every now and then, someone will go rogue and start turning people."

"Infecting them with your disease?" Shawn asked to verify his understanding.

"Yeah. Our transformative can be passed by blood or by sex. So if a Shadesider or a Darksider were to bite someone and they survived, they would become one of us."

"So you're basically talking about vampires."

"Yes. Two distinct groups. The good vampires try to protect the Brightsiders and keep them from finding out about us. The bad vampires tend to find places to feed where they won't be noticed and are careful not to leave any of their victims alive."

"Hold on. When I went to the hospital for a blood test, the doctor made me strip naked and looked at me really carefully to be sure that I hadn't been bitten. He was checking me for vampire bites, wasn't he?"

"Yes. I guess you must have mentioned White Castle when you talked to him, because Rafe called me when he was done examining you and asked me about what was going on."

"Dr. Killian is one of you?"

"Yes. Even though it can be difficult at times, some of us have found ways to manage lives in the Brightsider world."

"So all that talk about 'brain eating amoebas' was just talk?"

"Yeah. He used to talk about hemorrhagic fever like that, but people aren't as afraid of that as they used to be." Lane said with a smile, then his expression became serious as he quietly said, "Be on alert. There's someone up ahead."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts took slow careful steps as he followed Lane into the next clearing. His hand automatically went to the weapon he had tucked in his belt.

"Oh, it's you!" Lane said with relief.

"It took you long enough! I was just about to call to see if you were alright." A younger teenager said with annoyance.

"Shawn, this is Duran, my husband." Lane said as he draped an arm around Duran's shoulders.

"It's nice to meet you." Agent Roberts said uncertainly.

"Is he the one from earlier?" Duran asked quietly.

"Yes. I could tell that he wouldn't be able to let it go until he saw for himself that things were resolved, so I brought him along."

"If Morgan finds out, he's going to explode."

"I'll count that as a bonus."

"I just heard from Kevin a few minutes ago. We need to go north. They may have found him."

"You up to a hike, Shawn?"

After making a point to look at his suit and dress shoes, Agent Roberts asked, "Do I have time to go and get some proper hiking gear?"

"Try to keep up." Lane said with a grin, then left the path and took off cross country.

* * * * *

Shawn did his best to keep up with the pair, but he was frankly in awe of their ability to travel across the untamed landscape without even a flashlight to guide them.

At one time or another he had seen each of them dart into places that he would swear that a rabbit couldn't go.

At one point he found Lane standing on a rise, watching him, waiting for him to catch up.

Agent Roberts had the distinct feeling that the pair could have traversed the distance in half the time if he hadn't been accompanying them.

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts finally arrived, Duran made a shushing motion.

With a few gestures, Lane and Duran indicated for Agent Roberts and another man to remain where they were and to stay silent.

After receiving matching nods from the pair, Duran and Lane moved so quickly that they almost seemed to vanish right before Shawn's eyes.

* * * * *

The minutes that followed were agonizing.

Agent Roberts and the unknown man stood silently, both listening for any indication of what was going on.

The sound of the man's cell phone ringing nearly made Agent Roberts jump out of his skin.

"This is Kevin. What'cha got?" The man asked by way of greeting.

Shawn waited anxiously for any clue to be revealed.

"We're on our way." Kevin said before disconnecting the call and putting his phone away.

Before Agent Roberts could ask, Kevin said, "They've got him, but they're going to need our help."

"Who are you?"

"Kevin Erickson. I'm guessing since you're on the sideline with me, that you're not one of them either." Kevin said as he forged their path through the untamed woods.

"No. I'm just a regular guy." Agent Roberts reluctantly admitted as he did his best to point the flashlight where it was needed.

"Don't let it get you down. They *need* people like us. I sometimes wish that they'd bring a few more in. They take too many unnecessary risks just to protect their *secret*." Kevin said as he determinedly pressed forward.

"People like us?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Yes. We're their hands and eyes in the world of sunlight. The Shadesiders have amazing abilities and can do so much to improve the world, but they're hobbled by their aversion to sunlight and their need to remain hidden. Together we can realize possibilities that neither of us could conquer alone." Kevin said passionately.

"Forgive me for asking, but are you part of some kind of a religion or something?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I guess you could say that. I'm what's called a Behilflicher. My family line has been the daytime protectors of those we now call Shadesiders for thirteen generations. Although it isn't *exactly* a

religion, I was raised to understand that I was born with a duty and a destiny."

"Thirteen generations? This thing is a whole lot bigger than what I'm seeing, isn't it?"

"Yes." Kevin chirped, then quickly added, "They should be just up ahead."

* * * * *

"You two, be sure to stay back until we have him under control." Lane said with difficulty.

Agent Roberts was surprised to see Lane, Duran and two others trying to overpower and subdue the naked, filthy version of Devin Barnes.

"What can we do to help you?" Kevin asked seriously.

"Some handcuffs would be nice." Lane immediately responded.

"That's not something I'm in the habit of carrying." Kevin said regretfully.

"Here you go." Agent Roberts said as he held a pair of handcuffs out to Kevin.

"Your new friend has some. Catch." Kevin called, then threw the handcuffs to Lane.

Agent Roberts was surprised when Lane's hand popped up and caught the handcuffs perfectly.

As Lane fought to get the cuffs on the boy, Agent Roberts caught his first good look at Devin's face.

Whereas he had been able to tell himself that everything so far had been mistaken perceptions and enthusiastic exaggerations, the hideously deformed face with snarling fangs finally convinced him that he was actually dealing with something beyond the 'natural'.

In addition to that drastic physical transformation, Agent Roberts could also see that Devin appeared to have some formidable claws, on both his hands and feet.

As Lane got one of the handcuffs placed, Devin suddenly twisted and arched his body and very nearly freed himself.

Without thinking, Agent Roberts drew his weapon and trained it on the boy as he held perfectly still.

"Please don't shoot him." Kevin said quietly from his side.

"I promise not to shoot unless I have no other choice." Agent Roberts said as he fought down his rising adrenaline.

"If they can capture him, we're hoping that we'll be able to help him." Kevin quietly explained.

"Help him? How?"

"That's not my department. But if they believe that they can do it, I think it's worth giving them every opportunity."

"What caused this to happen to him?" Agent Roberts asked as he continued to hold his gun steadily before him.

"I don't know his story, so I can only tell you what I believe based on the stories that I was told as a child."

Devin let loose a feral growl that sent a shiver up Agent Roberts' spine.

"It's been said that in the past, there were people among the peasantry who couldn't accept the blessing of the bite. Those wretched souls would divest themselves of all humanity and assume the forms of animals, living only for carnal pleasures, never to be human again."

"Could you tell me what that means in plain English?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"Although it's basically unheard of in the modern age, I believe that what we've encountered is a werewolf."

"A werewolf? You mean with full moons, silver bullets and all of that?"

"Those are just things made up by authors and movie producers to make their stories more entertaining. In reality, the stories of *actual* werewolves are nothing less than tragic. By my understanding of it, werewolves are failed vampires. When the transformative organism is introduced into their bodies, the change that results is drastically different from Shadesiders or Darksiders. Mentally, they lose their sense of self and become wild animals. Physically, their bodies are able to transform to become almost animal in appearance."

"I've seen some pictures taken of Devin from yesterday and he looked... well, mostly human. He certainly didn't look anything like this."

"He can transform now. I doubt that he has the mental capacity to know that he's doing it, but there are times when he'll look entirely human and other times when he will look like a beast."

"But he was wearing clothes yesterday and today he's not."

"Again, I don't know anything about this boy specifically, you said his name was Devin? Well, if he were wearing clothes yesterday, that could indicate that he either hadn't completed the transformation yet or that he had only recently transformed and hadn't fully lost his humanity at that time."

"Does that mean that if they're able to subdue him, that they might be able to do something to help him?"

"That's the hope. As I said, there are no accounts of werewolves existing in the modern age. While I'm sure that Rafe has a plan, no one can be sure if it will work or not."

"Rafe? As in Dr. Killian?"

"Yes. He has the most knowledge about the transformative. He's been studying it for centuries. If there's anything that can be done to help Devin, he'll know about it."

"You can put your gun away. We got him." Duran called out.

Agent Roberts surveyed the scene before him and saw that they had Devin's hands cuffed behind his back and had the boy forced down on the ground with his face in the dirt.

"What do you need for us to do?" Kevin asked seriously.

"We're parked at 3rd and Reinhard. Go on ahead and see if you can arrange it so that we won't draw too much attention." Duran said decisively as he pitched Kevin his keys.

"Will you help me?" Kevin asked Agent Roberts hopefully.

"Sure. It'll be good to be able to do something to help."

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts and Kevin arrived at the street, it was like stepping into a different world. There was light traffic passing by and no one seemed to take notice of them at all.

"Good. It's not too busy." Kevin said with relief.

"What are we supposed to do?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked around.

"Open the trunk for them, then we'll do whatever else is necessary. We might have to provide a distraction so that they can get Devin into the car without being seen."

"I'm an FBI agent. I'm not sure that I should really be participating in something like this."

"FBI, huh? Tell me, why are you here? What kept you from calling in reinforcements at the fight or firing your gun back there?"

"I guess that I just wanted to know what was really going on."

"Then help us get Devin into the car. Whatever answers you're looking for are probably going to be at our destination."

"Do you know where that is?"

"No one's said, but I'd be willing to bet that we're going to Rafe and Dodger's house."

* * * * *

It seemed to take an inordinate amount of time for the four Shadesiders to carry the naked struggling boy out of the woods, but as soon as they cleared the park entrance, they had Devin in the trunk in the blink of an eye.

Lane and Duran got into the car where they had put Devin in the trunk, the other two Shadesiders hurried back into the park as Kevin and Agent Roberts got into Kevin's car.

Although Agent Roberts was aware that he had an opportunity to ask any questions that he might have, he found that he already had too much new information to process.

In the end, they rode in silence, each thinking their own thoughts.

Chapter 3

Agent Roberts didn't know what to expect, but was nonetheless surprised when they arrived at the secluded mansion on the hill.

"We'll need to stay in the car until they get Devin inside. If he were to bite one of them, they'd just have a bite to deal with. If he bites one of us, it could kill us." Kevin calmly explained.

"Wouldn't it just turn us into werewolves or vampires or something?"

"That's possible. But a certain percentage of people exposed to the transformative can't adapt to the change and die in transition."

"You said that your family protects the Shadesiders. Do they ever end up biting one of you?"

"There have been a few times when it came down to a choice of their survival or ours. In those cases, we've willingly sacrificed ourselves so that they might live."

"How can you live with that, knowing that you might have to give up your life for someone else?"

"They're our purpose. How could we go on living knowing that we could have done something to save them?"

"I can't imagine having such a clear vision of your purpose in life."

"We are truly blessed."

* * * * *

As soon as Devin had been carried inside, Kevin and Agent Roberts finally got out of the car.

As impressive as the entryway was with its immense porch leading to elegantly styled double doors, it paled in comparison to the spectacle of the grand ballroom inside.

Agent Roberts was frankly in awe of the enormous room styled with old world elegance. The curved staircase drew his eyes up to the balcony surrounding the room and on up to the crystal chandelier.

"What kind of place is this?" Agent Roberts whispered as he stared.

"This is Rafe and Dodger's home. I guess when you have an extended lifespan, you have time to make things be exactly the way you want them."

"Extended lifespan?"

"That's another benefit of the transformative... or maybe it's a curse. I guess it depends on how you choose to live your life."

"So when you said that Dr. Killian had been working for centuries..."

"Yeah. I was speaking literally."

"Where do we go now?"

"I'm guessing that we'll need to go to the basement. I can't think of anyplace else that Devin could be kept without wrecking the place." Kevin said as he walked to a door that was nearly hidden amongst all the ornate woodwork.

Agent Roberts followed along silently, not knowing what to expect.

* * * * *

"Be ready to run back upstairs. It's still possible that they could lose control of him." Kevin warned as they slowly started down.

Agent Roberts had his hand on his gun and was ready to run at the first sign of trouble.

As they descended the stairs, Agent Roberts could hear growling and frantic voices.

"He broke the handcuffs!"

"That's okay. Just finish his feet."

"Have you got him? I need to get him some juice."

"Yeah. Go ahead. We just have to finish tying him down."

As they continued down the stairs, Agent Roberts was finally able to see the expansive room.

His attention was immediately drawn to the crude wooden chair where Devin was being restrained.

"Are you sure that this will hold him?" Lane asked as he continued to wrap the struggling boy's forearms with heavy wire.

"He's weak from hunger so yeah, I'm sure." A young man answered as he crossed the room carrying a large sports drink bottle.

"If this is him being weak, I don't want to see what he's like when he's strong." Lane said frankly.

"That reminds me. Since you brought him here, it's going to be up to you to take care of him. You'll need to see that he's fed and watered and remember to clean up after him."

"Dodger! Isn't that kinda cold blooded? I mean, considering that Devin was a perfectly normal kid just a few days ago?" Lane asked challengingly.

"You're right. That was totally inappropriate of me." Dodger easily admitted, then added, "But still, remember what I said when it's time for 'walkies'."

"I don't know anything about werewolves. Is it even possible to potty train or housebreak them?" Duran asked thoughtfully.

"I don't know either. With any luck, maybe Rafe will be able to come up with something to help him before we have to find out." Dodger said hopefully.

"I think we've got him as secure as we're going to get him. Are you ready to feed him now?" Lane asked cautiously.

"Here you go." Dodger said as he offered the sports drink bottle.

Lane flashed him a dirty look before reluctantly accepting the drink.

Dodger smiled with satisfaction, then seemed to notice Agent Roberts in attendance.

"Hello. My name is Dodger Tribodeaux and this is my house. Are you the FBI agent that they were telling me about?"

"That's right. Agent Shawn Roberts." Shawn cautiously responded.

"Lane said that it was important for you to be here, but I haven't been filled in on the 'why'." Dodger finished with a significant look at Lane.

"He's been like this toward me ever since I married his nephew." Lane said to Agent Roberts with a slight eyeroll.

It was only then that Agent Roberts realized that Lane was holding the sports bottle forward so that Devin could drink from it.

"The timing just happens to be a coincidence." Dodger said as he tried to restrain a smile.

"Face it Lane, no one will ever be good enough for *his* nephew." Kevin said, not even bothering to hide his grin.

"Let's go have a seat and leave the boys to handle this. You, too, Kevin. We haven't visited for a while." Dodger suggested as he indicated a small sitting area across the room.

"Have you heard anything from Brian and Evan?" Kevin asked as he started walking.

Agent Roberts followed along, but kept at least *some* of his attention on the 'werewolf' across the room.

"No. But that's not unusual. I think the last that we heard they were visiting some acquaintances in Eastern Europe and introducing the boys to them, but you might ask Rafe about that when he gets home. As you might expect, he has more contact with his parents than I do."

"I'll remember to ask him." Kevin said simply, then added, seemingly as an afterthought, "After all the years of watching over Evan and his mother, it feels wrong to me not to know where he is and what he's doing."

"We all knew that it would be a difficult adjustment for you, but Duncan's keeping you busy, isn't he?" Dodger asked as he arrived at the seating area and motioned for his two companions to take seats.

"Oh sure. I just can't help but miss Evan. He's almost like my own son." Kevin quietly answered.

"Can I get either of you a drink?" Dodger asked as he walked to a mini fridge.

"A coke, if you have one." Kevin immediately answered.

Although Agent Roberts was thirsty, he was wary of accepting food or drinks from a stranger, especially after what had happened earlier in the day.

"No. Thank you." Agent Roberts said quietly.

"Let me know if you get thirsty." Dodger said easily as he popped the top off a coke bottle, then placed it on the coffee table in front of Kevin.

Agent Roberts nodded that he would.

"So, tell me, what brings you here this evening?" Dodger asked curiously as he took his seat.

"I was promised some answers." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"From what Lane told me, he thought that we could explain things to Agent Roberts so that he could be at peace with how we're resolving things. Then, when we're sure that everything's going to be okay, you could suppress his memories without causing him lasting mental damage." Kevin carefully explained.

"Lane seems to have an almost instinctive understanding of how the thrall interacts with the Brightsider psyche. I'll trust him to know what he's talking about." Dodger said thoughtfully to Kevin, then looked to Agent Roberts and said, "You may have to wait for Rafe for some of your answers, but I'll be happy to tell you what I can."

"So Kevin and I are what you call Brightsiders, have I got that part right?" Agent Roberts asked to confirm.

"Kevin is a Behilflicher, so while he may *technically* be thought of as a Brightsider, we tend to think of him in a class all his own. He's trusted without reservation, so generally when we're discussing anything that has to do with Brightsiders, we're not necessarily talking about him."

"Okay. I think I understand that." Agent Roberts said slowly, then continued, "But you, Dr. Killian, Lane and Duran are all Shadesiders, right?"

"Again, it depends on how you look at it. From one perspective, we could all be looked at as Shadesiders, but if you want to get technical about it, I'm probably the only *true* Shadesider in the group."

"How is that?" Kevin asked with interest.

"Well, Duran and Lane are both Dhamphirs, sometimes called daywalkers. That was kind of a parting gift from Evan, right before he left."

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"It's a long story. Suffice it to say that Evan has the ability to go out into full sunlight. Before he left with Rafe's parents, he passed his ability on to Lane and Duran. I'm not exactly sure what his motivation was for doing that, but they've become invaluable to us, being able to handle things outside the house during the daylight hours." Dodger carefully explained.

"Without their help, I would have been trying to track down and capture Devin all on my own today." Kevin interjected.

"What about Dr. Killian? I saw him at the hospital today. Is he a Dhamphir too?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"No. He's a Shadesider, but he can also be thought of as a Pure Blood. He was never a Brightsider. He was born with the transformative." Dodger carefully explained.

"Does he have some kind of special powers because of it?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"It's hard to say what's caused by him being a Pure Blood and what's just because he's so much older than the rest of us. As far as I know, the only thing that's different about him is that he'll presumably be able to father a child. The rest of us are sterile in that sense of the word. For us to reproduce, we have to pass on our transformative to Brightsiders and turn them."

"If your relationship to Dr. Killian is what I think it is, I can't see that his fertility is going to be of much use." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Well, practice makes perfect." Dodger said with a grin, then continued more seriously, "Even if he were in a straight relationship, the chances of his wife becoming pregnant would be astronomically low. It's just that way with Shadesider women."

A mechanical sound drew Agent Roberts' attention and he turned in time to see the elevator doors open.

"Welcome home." Dodger said with a smile as he stood.

Agent Roberts and Kevin also stood as Dr. Killian walked across the room to join them.

"How is he?" Dr. Killian asked as he looked at Devin with concern.

"We've just gotten him settled in and given him some juice. Lane's been taking good care of him." Dodger said as he wrapped Dr. Killian in a hug.

"Agent Roberts, what a surprise to see you here." Dr. Killian said before returning Dodger's hug firmly.

"I doubt that you're more surprised than I am."

Dr. Killian finished his hug, then released Dodger before asking, "What's changed so that we've invited the FBI over this evening?"

"You'd have to ask Lane to be sure, but the way I understood his reasoning was that if Agent Roberts can see for himself and know without a doubt that Devin's going to be alright, then we can enthrall him and erase his memory of this entire evening and it shouldn't do any damage to him." Dodger said carefully.

"One of these days Lane's going to need to learn that people sometimes have to endure hardships and traumas. Overcoming things like that makes them stronger." Dr. Killian said frankly, then gave a weary sigh before continuing, "But I suppose that since Agent Roberts is already here that we might as well continue with Lane's plan."

"Dr. Killian." Agent Roberts said to draw his attention, "When you drew my blood, did you actually test it for anything, or did you go through all of that just to see if I'd been bitten?"

"Actually, I ran the entire battery of tests, just like I said that I would. They didn't reveal anything to be concerned about, so I forwarded the results to your office... as per your request."

"Thank you." Agent Roberts said cautiously, feeling as though Dr. Killian had somehow evaded his question.

"Well, if you're here to see for yourself what's going to happen to Devin, then I suppose that we'd better get started."

"What are you going to do?"

"First I'll draw some blood and take a good look at that. I have everything I need upstairs in my office. I'll have to wait to decide what to do next until after I've seen what we're dealing with."

"He's a werewolf. What more do you need to know?" Duran asked frankly.

Although the question was asked without sounding derogatory in nature, Agent Roberts still felt that Duran might have been able to find a way to ask more politely.

"I'm going to do my best to determine if anything I'm thinking of doing to treat Devin might cause more harm than good." Dr. Killian answered simply.

"What if you can't find a treatment for him?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Dr. Killian said gravely.

Agent Roberts didn't want to imagine what that might mean.

"Lane, why don't you and Duran do your best to relax Devin while I'm gathering what I need to draw his blood. If you run into any trouble, have Dodger help you." Dr. Killian suggested with renewed motivation.

"Are you sure that you don't want Dodger to try first? He's the strongest with the thrall." Lane asked uncertainly.

"Dodger has the most raw power, but I think that you just about equal him in control. See what you can do." Dr. Killian said decisively.

Lane seemed anxious, but Agent Roberts could also detect the slightest hint of pride that Dr. Killian thought so highly of his ability.

"You'll want to see this." Kevin said from Agent Roberts' side.

"See what?"

"How they use their powers. Not many Brightsiders get to see this."

"If you'll remember, the plan is for me to have my memory wiped out when this is all over."

"Plans can change. Just watch." Kevin said as he focused on what Lane and Duran were doing.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts watched, but wasn't quite sure of what he was supposed to be seeing.

"Here it comes." Kevin whispered.

It took a moment, but then Agent Roberts saw a ghostly golden aura begin to surround Lane. At the same time, to a lesser degree, a similar aura of white began to envelop Duran.

Both young men appeared to be standing silently, but Agent Roberts could feel their calming influence wash over him as though it were a tangible thing.

As the seconds passed, Agent Roberts was suddenly aware of the auras taking on boundaries and forming into recognizable shapes.

"They're wings." Agent Roberts gasped when he realized what he was seeing.

"And halos." Kevin said with a tranquil smile.

Agent Roberts shifted his gaze slightly and saw exactly what Kevin was talking about.

"That's right boys. Just keep soothing him like that. If you can keep him calm long enough, maybe I can get him cleaned up a little." Dodger said before hurrying away.

Agent Roberts finally tore his gaze away from Lane and Duran so that he could get a look at how Devin was doing.

The fangs seemed to have receded as had the claws.

Although the boy's hair was still a wild mess, it didn't look 'unnatural', just messy.

All in all, Devin was once again recognizable as being himself.

Beyond that, Devin seemed to have calmed down to a point where he was able to look around curiously. He didn't look like a frantic trapped animal as much as a curious animal in unfamiliar surroundings.

* * * * *

When Dodger returned, he had a bucket with some soapy water and a few towels.

"Would you like some help with that?" Kevin offered.

"I would appreciate the help, but I think it's still too dangerous for either of you to get near Devin. One little 'nip' and we'll have a whole new set of problems on our hands." Dodger said as he moved close to Devin and was careful not to make any sudden moves.

"*That's right. Dodger's just going to clean you up.*" Lane said in a soothing voice as he maintained his focus on Devin.

It was only then that Agent Roberts realized that Lane and Duran hadn't been speaking the whole time.

"They don't need to talk to enthrall you?" Agent Roberts asked in a whisper.

"No. In fact, they don't even need words to command you. They can compel you to do something without you ever knowing that they did it." Kevin confirmed.

"With a power like that, they could command and control whole cities and governments." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Shadesiders typically don't like to involve themselves in Brightsider matters any more than they have to. There are a few who work in government offices and other places of power for the good of the whole Shadeside community. But most are content to live their lives and do the things that they enjoy, contributing to the community each in their own way."

"So Dr. Killian researches the transformative. Lane and Duran do things in the daylight that other Shadesiders can't do. What does Dodger do?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"When someone gets turned, it's a delicate and dangerous time. Dodger is one of the people who helps people go through transition. From what I understand, the physical danger is secondary to the emotional toll it can take."

"I don't understand." Agent Roberts quietly admitted.

"The transformative is like a disease. When it's introduced to a new organism, there's no telling how it's going to react. Some people die. Other people lose their humanity and it becomes a contest for survival. Being forced to kill someone that you've sworn to help... that's a kind of hurt that doesn't go away."

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Dr. Killian gently asked as he stepped off the elevator, carrying a black leather case.

"Lane did a good job of calming him. I think he's right where he needs to be." Dodger said seriously.

"Be ready to knock him out, if this agitates him too badly." Dr. Killian warned.

"I'll be ready." Dodger said quietly.

Agent Roberts could tell that, much like Lane, Dodger didn't want to take the chance of hurting Devin.

"Shhh. I'll be done in just a minute." Dr. Killian crooned as he swabbed Devin's arm.

"*It'll be okay. We're all here to help you. You're in a safe place.*" Duran assured Devin quietly.

From Devin's expression, it was obvious that he didn't comprehend their spoken words, but their quiet tones seemed to add to the

soothing quality of the 'thrall' that both Duran and Lane were still projecting.

"Almost..." Dr. Killian whispered as he worked quickly and efficiently.

"Almost..." He said again as he waited for the large vial of blood to finish filling.

"That's got it. You did a great job, Devin. What a brave strong boy." Dr. Killian said soothingly as he worked.

"I'd give him a lollipop, but I doubt that he'd be able to manage something like that." Dodger said warmly.

"Now that he's had a few minutes, do you think he could have some more juice?" Duran asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I think that's a very good idea. No matter what happens next, he's probably going to need his strength."

"I'm going to get to work on this blood sample." Dr. Killian said as he gathered his things.

"Do you want me to let you know when dinner is ready or leave you alone?"

"Let me know, but don't get your feelings hurt if I'm in the middle of something and can't put it down right away."

"Don't worry. I understand." Dodger said tenderly.

"Make sure you don't leave Devin unattended. If he were to get frightened, he might end up hurting himself trying to get loose."

"Don't worry. Lane will see that Devin has everything he needs." Dodger said with a grin in his direction.

Lane rolled his eyes, but didn't disagree.

Dr. Killian leaned in and gave Dodger a quick kiss before hurrying toward the elevator.

"Agent Roberts, I'm going upstairs to make dinner. You can go with me if you like, or you can stay down here with Lane and Duran, if you would rather." Dodger said simply, not revealing if he had any preference in the matter.

"If I'm understanding what I'm seeing here, nothing more is probably going to happen until Dr. Killian is done with his tests." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Likely not." Dodger agreed.

"I'll stay down here with Lane and Duran, in case they need my help for something." Kevin announced.

"Thanks Kevin. We really appreciate not only that you're willing to help us out, but also that you go above and beyond to do more than we'd ever ask of you." Dodger said sincerely.

"It's what I do." Kevin muttered shyly at the praise.

"Before you can think otherwise, you're invited for dinner." Dodger said simply, then started walking toward the elevator.

Agent Roberts glanced around the room, to assure him that there was no compelling reason for him to stay, then hurried to catch up to Dodger.

* * * * *

"So, Agent Roberts, now that we have some time alone, are there any questions that I can answer for you?" Dodger asked as he walked to the refrigerator.

"I don't know if there's a point to me asking questions, since the plan is for me to have my memories wiped out when everything is resolved."

"Since you've been with us, has Duran mentioned his father to you?" Dodger asked as he carried some vegetables to the sink.

"No. I don't think so." Agent Roberts said slowly as he tried to recall.

"My brother Duncan came to live with us, with me and Rafe, about... I guess it was over forty years ago now. It was a difficult decision, but we decided to tell him everything."

"If he couldn't handle it, couldn't you just wipe out his memory, like you're planning to do to me?"

"We could *try*. When you're dealing with the human mind, things don't always work the way you want them to. Sometimes compulsions break. Sometimes commands are misinterpreted. And sometimes it's like the thing Lane is so worried about, an artificial flaw introduced into a mind can grow and fracture and end up causing deep lifelong damage to a person."

"So, are you saying that you didn't wipe his mind?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"To the Brightside world, Duncan's just a delivery driver, but to the entire Shadeside community, he's the 'go-to' guy for just about anything you need done in the world of daylight. He took the fact that he was privy to some forbidden knowledge and found a way to capitalize on it. As it turns out, the whole Shadeside community is better off for it."

"Is this your way of asking if I'll use my FBI resources to help you?" Agent Roberts asked suspiciously.

"No. Not precisely. This is more my way of asking you that if you encounter a Shadesider in the course of your duties, that you at least *consider* their situation, rather than putting them in a position where you know that they'll be severely injured or discovered." Dodger said carefully as he steadfastly kept his focus on chopping vegetables.

"You want to protect your people. I can respect that." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"This world we're living in, it's changing so quickly that it's all we can do to keep up with it. Somehow Morgan has been able to arrange things so that we've been able to update our identities

when we need to, but it's only a matter of time before he's discovered or some technology comes along that we're not able to circumvent."

"What will you do then?"

"I don't know. I think that it's impossible to know until we see the situation we're in when that time comes. The best we can do is prepare ourselves as much as we can and hope that it's enough."

"I still don't know if you're my friend or my enemy."

"I don't know that either, but what I *can* tell you is that I don't hate you or want to see you come to harm. I don't know if that helps, but maybe it's a start."

"I don't hate you either. I'm afraid of you, but I don't hate you."

Dodger smiled at the frank admission, then said, "I'm afraid of you too, for different reasons."

"Afraid of me? Why?"

"Well, there's the obvious. You could shoot me with that gun you've been keeping cleverly concealed. But beyond that, whether your memory is hidden from you or not, you'll still have the capability of summoning forces that we're unable to stand against. It is fully within your power to destroy our entire way of life."

"I really wish that I could tell you I wouldn't do something like that, but just like with the scenario you described, I can't predict what I'll do at some future time because I don't know who I'll be defending from whom."

"How about we agree that we won't intentionally hurt each other without a compelling reason to do so?" Dodger asked as he looked away from his cutting board.

"I think I can get onboard with that." Agent Roberts finally conceded.

"Good. It may not be 'friendship' in the strictest sense of the word, but maybe we can use it as a foundation."

"I'm sure that there have been very good friendships that have started out with a lot less." Agent Roberts said honestly, then thought to ask, "Do you need some help with that?"

"I wouldn't mind it if you took the packages of meat out of the bottom of the fridge and set them by the stove."

"I can do that."

* * * * *

"Dr. Killian? Dodger asked me to tell you that dinner will be ready in a few minutes. He said that with the boys downstairs, that he's going to serve it at the kitchen table." Agent Roberts said from Rafe's study doorway.

"Come in, Agent Roberts. I'd like for you to see this." Rafe said as he rolled his office chair away from his desk.

Agent Roberts walked slowly into the room, then around the edge of the desk where he could see the computer screens.

"You'll have to tell me what I'm looking at."

"The first screen is a sample of Devin's blood."

"Okay. I've seen quite a few blood samples during my time at the academy and none of them ever looked like this."

"I'm still waiting on a few more tests, but from what I'm seeing here, I'm guessing that Devin has a disorder which causes his body to be unable to produce a particular enzyme which aids in digestion. That, in turn, impacts his entire body, making him malnourished in a very specific way."

"I didn't see any signs of him being malnourished in his pictures. A little underweight maybe, but that's not uncommon for a fifteen year old. With all the starts and stops in growth, they tend to be a little gawky and angular."

"True. I'm sure the malnourishment would have manifested later in his adult years, when his body had reached a point where it couldn't compensate for it any longer."

"Okay. I think I understand that, but what does it have to do with what I'm seeing here?"

"The blood sample that you're looking at is Devin's blood *since* he's been introduced to the transformative agent. To say that it mutated is an understatement. It seems that the transformative must need that particular enzyme or its resulting secretions to properly replicate and overtake the organism."

"So it's not working in him like it works in you?"

"Correct. When the transformative encountered his enzyme deficient blood, it attempted to adapt its replicative strategy and found a way to overtake Devin's entire body with an altered form of itself."

"So that's why he's a werewolf instead of a vampire... shadesider... you know what I mean."

"Yes. I do. And you're right."

"Okay. I think I get the gist of that, but what do you have on the second monitor?"

"That's a little experiment that I did, introducing an updated version of the transformative to Devin's already infected blood."

"It's like a crime scene photo on the cellular level. All the cells have been torn to shreds."

"You're very good at interpreting these. Yes. It's as you said, all the cells have been destroyed. The old 'mutated' transformative and the new version of the transformative were incompatible and in their haste to try and assimilate each other, they destroyed the host cells in the process."

"Which means that if you gave that stuff to Devin, he would die within a few hours."

"I'd estimate eight to ten hours of pure hell."

"Please tell me that this last screen holds some good news."

"I don't know about that yet, but it holds hope."

"I'll take it. What are we looking at?"

"I gave Devin's blood sample some very specific... let's call it a vitamin shot. I did my best to replace what was missing from Devin's cells before he was transformed."

"Okay. So you gave his anemic cells a boost. Is that what this is?"

"No. After giving them the boost, I once again introduced the new transformative into the mix. At least on a cellular level, they seem to have undone much of the damage caused by the 'mutant' transformative."

"So all you have to do is give Devin a vitamin shot and then that super duper transformative stuff and he'll be alright?"

"You know nothing's ever that easy."

"Yes, I *do* know that. I was being sarcastic."

"I thought so." Rafe said wearily, then continued, "Devin doesn't need a vitamin shot, he needs an extensive course of therapy. It's going to take time for his cells to absorb enough of the essential nutrients for this to have a chance of working. And we've got to be very careful, because we'll only have one shot at this. If we give him the new transformative too early... you remember that hellish death we were talking about? That."

"Are you guys going to come and eat or not?" Dodger asked from the doorway.

"We're on our way." Rafe immediately answered.

"How long do you think the treatment will take?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Weeks... Months, maybe. We'll just have to keep monitoring his cellular viability and absorption rates."

"So I guess having him back to normal and ready to leave with me in the morning is a little too much to ask."

"That's *never* going to happen. Whether he ends up being a werewolf, a dhampir or something we've never encountered before, the one thing that's certain is that he can never go back to his old life."

Chapter 4

"Aren't the boys going to eat with us?" Dr. Killian asked as he entered the kitchen.

"I thought it would be best to take them their meals downstairs, so that they can stay and watch over Devin." Dodger said simply as he gave his husband a quick hug.

"Be sure that you send enough for Devin to have some too. Juice doesn't take the place of food and the last thing Devin needs is to starve."

"Don't worry. There's plenty."

"What's going to happen to Devin?" Agent Roberts asked as he took his seat.

"It's too early to say. But whatever happens, we'll make sure that he has the best possible quality of life." Dr. Killian promised.

"What's going to happen to me?" Agent Roberts asked more quietly.

"Our priority is the protection of the Shadeside community. If we can achieve that goal without causing you harm, of course we'll do that." Dr. Killian answered simply.

"Is that a threat?"

"No. That's a fact." Dr. Killian stated impassively, then continued, "If you'll be willing to work with us, I'm sure that we'll be able to come to some sort of an understanding."

"He's already told me that he'll do what he can to protect Shadesiders that he encounters in the course of his duties." Dodger quickly interjected.

"Before I agree to anything, I'd like a little better idea of what my 'help' will entail, in practical terms."

"If you're interviewing a witness who happens to be a Shadesider, arrange to speak to them at a time and place where there's less of a chance of them being endangered or found out." Dr. Killian suggested.

"So you're not asking me to look the other way or to hide what might end up being relevant evidence because a suspect is a Shadesider?"

"No. But I'm asking that you look at the situation as a thinking, feeling person with inside knowledge, rather than as a 'by-the-book' agent. Make the decision that will allow you to look at yourself in the mirror and see a decent person in the morning."

"What happens if I have a Shadesider in custody and can't do anything to help them?"

"In a case such as that, you can call me." Dr. Killian said simply, then explained, "In extreme emergencies, there are people that I can call upon for help, but I can't compromise them by giving you their names."

Agent Roberts slowly nodded that he understood.

"By the same token, I won't give them your name, either. There might come a situation where I might have cause to pass some sensitive information to you, but I wouldn't put anyone in contact with you without discussing it with you first."

"You're talking like I've already agreed to something." Agent Roberts said in a warning tone, then said more firmly, "I haven't."

"I understand that. We're just telling you how things *could* be. You haven't committed to anything." Dr. Killian explained.

"Agent Roberts, you have inside knowledge that the people who make and enforce the laws don't have access to. That gives you a unique opportunity to do something good and make a real difference." Dodger urged him to understand.

After a moment to process that, Agent Roberts quietly said, "I'm still not agreeing to anything, but maybe if you told me some more specifics about what happened to Devin, it might make it more clear to me how my help might be needed."

"We don't know everything, but I'll tell you what we've been able to come up with." Rafe said carefully.

Agent Roberts took another bite of his food as he waited.

"A Darksider named LeGrue had an unhealthy fascination with Devin. I have no idea if LeGrue was his real name or a pseudonym that he adopted after he was turned. I suppose it doesn't matter now.

"From what I've been told, LeGrue was 'turned' in Connecticut, so it seems likely that he knew Devin, or knew of him, in his former life there. Regardless, after he was turned, he came to Columbus with the Darksider who 'made' him. By the spotty accounts that I've been told, LeGrue couldn't get past his obsession with Devin and one night he disappeared.

"About a month later, he arrived in Columbus with Devin. It wasn't clear if Devin had been turned at that point because LeGrue was very possessive of him and wouldn't let others get near him.

"When the Darksider community found out that he had kidnapped Devin, they gave him an ultimatum. Give up the boy or leave their community.

"He left.

"That's when they sent a message through the grapevine to us, letting us know to be on the lookout for LeGrue. They called for a blood hunt. Although the Darksiders stand in direct opposition to just about everything we stand for, we have a common desire not to be found out. LeGrue's actions had the potential to draw attention to us and endanger both our communities.

"This morning the Darksiders sent word that they had eliminated LeGrue, but they weren't able to locate his 'childe' due to the impending daylight. They know that we have Brightsiders who help us during the day, so they warned us to be on the lookout for Devin and told us that he was probably hiding in the park."

"I assume that if they had gotten to Devin first, they would have killed him." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"Yes. Eventually. But I'm sure they would have engaged in some sort of depraved 'entertainment' with him first. It's their way."

"What I don't get is why would LeGrue kidnap Devin in the first place? Is it just so that he could bite him and turn him to be a companion?"

"No. Darksiders aren't typically worried too much about companionship. It's more likely that LeGrue lusted after Devin in his Brightsider life and when he lost his humanity, he became obsessed with Devin for purely sexual reasons."

"That's it? He went through all that just for a sexual thrill? What a depraved monster!"

"Most Darksiders are. But as long as they restrict their activities and stay within certain boundaries, we overlook their transgressions as much as we can. It's a tenuous balance that we've achieved, but it mostly works."

"So to keep that peace, the Darksiders let you know what was going on?"

"That's the way it was presented to me, but they do what they do for their own reasons. I won't make the mistake of ever fully trusting them."

"So now that you have Devin, the Darksiders are pretty much out of the picture?"

"Probably. There's always a chance that they might demand to have Devin returned to them, claiming that he's theirs, since he was

'made' by one of them. But they know as well as we do that we won't give him back. If they decide to take that path, it would just be to stir things up... probably for a lack of anything more interesting to do."

"So he's staying with you. What happens to him next?"

"We'll do what we can to get him stronger and start him on his vitamin therapy. Once he's ready, we'll introduce the advanced transformative and... hope for the best. No one's ever attempted anything like what I'm planning. There is literally no way of knowing what will happen to him."

"Would it be better to leave him the way he is?"

"That is *not* an option." Dr. Killian said firmly, then explained, "Left as he is, Devin would have no meaningful life to speak of. If we can bring him back to any level of human consciousness, even if it's that of a young child, it would be better than leaving him as an animal."

"I'm glad that you have a clear idea of what's the right thing to do for him because I don't think I could keep from second guessing myself in a similar situation."

"I've had centuries to contemplate what it's like to exist without any concept of decency or good. That's where Devin is now. He's a 'thing'. He's no longer a person by any meaningful definition of the word. I'm going to do everything in my power to restore his ability to function as a person. I don't know if it will be possible to restore who he was, but if not, then we'll start anew with him and teach him how to love and be loved and participate in the world as a person who can make a difference."

"I hope that you're able to do that. I think that after what he's been through, he deserves that much."

"I don't know about that. I'm wary of wishing that anyone get what they 'deserve', but essentially what I want to give Devin is a chance at life."

"What do you think I can do to help you with that?"

"Well, when you go back to your job they're going to be expecting a report about what you found out about Devin. It's my hope that you will find a way to put them off his trail... maybe permanently."

"That's going to be difficult without a body."

"I know. The next best thing I can think of is if you report that you didn't find anything. Maybe you could report that you found his 'nest' but he either wasn't there or he escaped."

"As detail oriented as the bureau is, it might be difficult to fabricate a report. But when you think about it, even a half-assed lie has got to work a lot better than the truth in this case. There's no way that anyone would believe it."

"It doesn't hurt that there has been a recent resurgence in the popularity of vampires... especially the sparkly ones."

Dodger groaned and visibly cringed at the mention of them.

Dr. Killian laughed at his reaction and Agent Roberts couldn't help but smile a little.

"Thanks to those types of movies, the suggestion of *actual* vampires is looked upon as nothing but fantasy."

"The thing is, if I tell them that I found Devin's 'nest', I don't see how it's going to help us."

"It won't help *us*. It will help *you*." Dr. Killian said seriously, then explained, "If you can show them the location where Devin was taken with evidence that he had been there, then it will verify that you have been doing something productive with your time. Although you weren't able to rescue Devin from his captor, you at least picked up his trail and tracked him to his hiding place."

"And the assumption will be made that since they knew that I had discovered them, that they moved to another place... which we will mysteriously not be able to find."

"While it's not the ideal situation, realistically, I think it's the best we can come up with under the circumstances."

"I would feel a whole lot better about it if we could provide some kind of resolution for his poor family. They must be worried sick about him." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Well, short of finding a child to kill in his place, then mangling the corpse beyond all possible recognition or identification, I can't think of any way we can definitively close the case." Dr. Killian said frankly.

"You wouldn't do that, would you?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I've had occasion to do many things to protect myself or my community that you would look upon as being 'evil'. Sometimes you get backed into a corner and there's no easy way out. Choices have to be made, whether you like them or not. But to answer your question, I have not, nor would I, sacrifice one child for the benefit of another."

"That's good to know. But I still feel that there should be something more that we can do for Devin's family. If we leave things like they are, they might continue on for years or decades, always expecting Devin to appear on their doorstep at any moment."

"Maybe you should talk to Lane and Duran about this. They have more recent experience with this sort of thing and might be able to come up with some ideas that we haven't." Dodger interjected.

"I don't understand. How do you mean?"

"Duran and Lane both turned fairly recently. They've both chosen to withdraw from their families slowly, over a period of time..."

"Why?"

"Because we don't age like Brightsiders do. The longer we have contact with them, the more apparent it becomes that we're not aging. For Shadesiders who have families that they're close to, there is sometimes the option to take the opportunity to build up a

nice collection of memories before they finally have to break away completely."

"What does that have to do with Devin?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. But Lane and Duran have turned more recently and have had contact with their families. I think that gives them a completely different perspective."

"I've learned to trust in Dodger's instincts about such things. If he thinks that you should talk to the boys, I suggest you do it."

Agent Roberts looked down at his plate and realized that he had already finished his meal.

The food had been good, but that was not the thing at the forefront of his mind at that moment.

"Should I go downstairs and talk to them now?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously, in case there were some other business that they needed to discuss first.

"Hold on for a minute and I'll make up plates for them. You can take them down with you." Dodger said simply.

"I still have a few more tests that I need to run." Dr. Killian explained, then looked to Agent Roberts and said, "I won't be doing anything particularly sensitive at this stage of things, so please feel free to stop in if you have any questions for me or if you come to any decisions."

"I will. Thank you." Agent Roberts said sincerely, then watched as Dr. Killian left.

"It's a shame that it took Devin's tragedy to bring you out here. It kind of automatically puts us on opposite sides of things. I would really rather that it wasn't that way." Dodger said as he placed four empty plates on the table before him.

"It's looking more and more like I'm going to be on your side, at least in some things."

"We'll do our best to make you not regret that. I promise that we do as much as we can to make sure that things turn out for the best for as many of the people involved as possible."

"I believe that you do. But sometimes there just isn't a right answer. You end up having to choose from the least wrong ones."

"Yes. I suppose that *is* what we're doing, isn't it?"

"I just wish that there were more that we could do for Devin. It kills me that he's had his life taken away from him before he ever really had a chance to live it."

"I would like to give you some assurance about that, but all I have to offer is a glimmer of hope. No one knows more about the transformative than Rafe. If there's a way to restore Devin, he'll find it."

"And if there isn't?"

"Then there isn't. At a certain point we sometimes have to accept that certain things *aren't* possible. If it comes to that, we'll do what we have to do to give Devin the best quality of life that we can."

"This sucks."

"Yeah. Tell me about it." Dodger wearily chuckled as he started loading the filled plates onto a serving cart.

Agent Roberts watched and was about to offer to help when he realized that he'd just be in the way.

"Would you mind taking this down to the boys? I need to clear up after dinner."

"Will you come down when you're finished?"

"Probably."

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts stepped off the elevator, he noticed the aura of peace that radiated throughout the room.

"Thanks. I was starting to get really hungry." Lane said with a smile.

"He's always hungry." Duran said with a loving grin at his husband.

"How are things going down here?" Agent Roberts asked as he brought the serving cart nearer.

"We've been able to get Devin calmed down and cleaned up. I think that's pretty good, considering how he was when he first got here." Duran answered for the group.

Agent Roberts looked at Devin and could once again see him as a lost boy instead of as an insane animal.

"Do you think Devin will be able to eat something?" Lane asked curiously as he took one of the plates of food, then sat cross legged on the floor.

"Well, Dodger must think so, because he made a plate for him." Duran answered with a smile as he also took a plate.

"How are things going upstairs? What did we miss?" Lane asked curiously between bites of food.

"Just some talk... Actually, Dodger suggested that I ask you guys about something."

"What's that?"

"Well, nothing's for sure yet. I haven't agreed to anything. But it's been suggested that when I write my report that I tell them that I found Devin's hideout in the park, but say that he was long gone by the time I got there. The thing is, that leaves the door open for him to return. That gives his family hope that he'll be found... Dr. Killian says that that can never happen."

"If I'm understanding it right, even in the *best* best case scenario, Devin being able to have contact with his family is still a remote possibility." Duran said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. So Dodger suggested that maybe you two could help me come up with something that might be able to give them some closure. It kills me to think of them having Thanksgiving and looking at his empty place at the table or Christmas with presents for him waiting under the tree." Agent Roberts tried to explain.

"Why does this bother you so much?" Duran asked curiously.

"I guess because of my younger sister Shelly. All of this made me think about how it would affect her if something like this happened to me. I wouldn't want for her to have to go through the pain of grieving over losing me, but I also wouldn't want her to be saddled with the unrealistic hope that I might return someday." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"So you're trying to come up with something that you can put into your report that will give them a reason to accept Devin's loss without providing a body as evidence." Lane asked cautiously.

"Yes. That would be nice."

"If they want to believe that Devin's alive, they will. *Nothing* you can do will change that. All that stuff you imagined about Thanksgiving and Christmas, it could all happen. In fact, it *needs* to happen. With any luck, they will eventually accept it and move on with their lives." Duran said seriously.

"Yeah. And if Rafe *does* pull off some kind of miracle and is able to completely restore Devin to like he was before, then you haven't closed the door on his old life." Lane added.

Kevin nodded slowly, then said, "Keep your story simple and straight to the point. If you need for me to back you up on anything, just let me know so I won't contradict you."

"I entered the park, did some investigating, stumbled onto a trail which led me to the place where Devin had been living. He was already gone when I got there and I didn't see or hear anything." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"If you can get back to the scene where we fought Devin, there might be some evidence that he had been there." Duran said thoughtfully.

"There might also be evidence that *you* had been there." Agent Roberts reminded him.

"You said something about a 'nest' didn't you?"

"Yes. It just stands to reason that Devin and his captor would have a base of operations of some sort." Agent Roberts said reasonably.

"The clearing where we caught Devin was nothing like that. It's possible that there's another place where he actually *did* live for a while." Kevin said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "I can call Bruce and see if he's come across anything like that."

"Bruce?"

"He works for Rafe. As soon as the sun went down, he took a team to investigate the park, to make sure that LeGrue or Devin haven't turned anyone else that we hadn't heard about yet or left any evidence about who and what they are." Kevin explained as he took out his cell phone and dialed.

Before Agent Roberts could respond, Kevin was walking away with a cellphone pressed firmly to his ear.

"It sounds like you may be going back to the park tonight. If you do that, you need to know that the park is considered neutral territory for Darksiders and Shadesiders." Duran said seriously.

"Yeah. In the middle of downtown it's a place where those with animal instincts can run free and prowl for a while." Lane added.

"Do you do that?" Agent Roberts asked curiously, having difficulty imagining such a thing.

"Not at the park. Here at Rafe's house we can just step into the back yard and we have all the wilderness we need." Lane responded with a smile.

"Besides, I think we look at the park as being part of our 'job'. Since we can go out in daylight, we walk the park once every day or so to see if there's anyone there who accidentally got stranded in the daylight or anything like that."

"Does that happen a lot?"

"No. Not a lot, but it happens."

"We actually helped a stranded Darksider once. *That* was awkward." Lane said with a smile at the memory.

"But what we were saying is that while the Shadesiders and Darksiders all recognize the park as being a neutral zone where we won't fight each other, you're a Brightsider... our prey. In other words, it's still possible that there might be weak-willed or weak-minded individuals who will attack you. If you go back to the park, make sure not to go off on your own." Duran said firmly.

"Is that why the homeless avoid the park?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Well, duh!" Lane said with a roll of his eyes.

"There's no disputing a well-reasoned argument like that." Duran said with a loving grin at his husband."

"Agent Roberts, are you ready to go?" Kevin asked as he walked back to the group with purpose.

"To the park?"

"Bruce has already run across the 'nest'. I'll drive you over there so we can be sure that there's nothing to incriminate anyone else or evidence about the transformative. If you're planning to use the nest as evidence in your report, we need to get over there quickly."

"I'm just about ready. I just want to go upstairs and tell Dr. Killian something before we go."

"That's on our way. Come on."

* * * * *

"Did you tell Rafe that you're going to help us?" Kevin asked as they pulled away from Dr. Killian's house.

"I told him that I would evaluate each situation on a case by case basis and make my decisions accordingly. I didn't agree to be an 'operative' of the Shadeside, but I won't go out of my way to cause them harm."

"I'm sure he appreciates that. Every time they expose themselves to a Brightsider they put their entire community in danger."

"Given what little I know of them now, I don't know if I'd even recognize a Shadesider if I encountered one in my daily life."

"You probably wouldn't. They go out of their way to hide their difference from Brightsiders. But in that circumstance, it doesn't really matter if you know about them or not. It's usually only in an emergency situation that it's an issue."

"I suppose not."

"It's sometimes possible to spot Shadesiders if you know what to look for. The most obvious thing is their aversion to direct sunlight or harsh lighting. They are also susceptible to loud noises and strong odors. None of those things 'proves' that someone's a Shadesider, but once you suspect, you can be on the lookout for more signs."

"I wonder how many Shadesiders I've come across and never noticed that anything was off about them."

"Probably not very many. They're very careful about controlling their numbers. That's one reason that the Darksiders were so upset with LeGrue. He made a 'childe' without permission. One instance of that wouldn't necessarily cause a problem, but if he got away with it without any consequences, that would be like putting out a message to the whole Darkside community that the Brightsider buffet is open for them to enjoy."

"So the Darksiders *do* have some sort of rule of law?"

"Yes. It's fairly straightforward and savage; the minimum to protect their society."

"Speaking of savage, what's up with Lane and Dodger? One minute they're like best friends, the next they're being rude and insulting to each other."

"It took me a while to figure that one out too. But as far as I can tell, it has a lot to do with how Lane can accept affection... something to do with his mother. If Dodger was openly and unreservedly affectionate toward Lane, it wouldn't feel genuine to him. In Lane's mind, he has to *earn* it for it to be real."

"That's pretty messed up."

"Shadesiders are people too. They have hangups and baggage just like anyone else."

"But they also have longer to work things out."

"True. But just because someone has the time, doesn't mean they'll do anything with it."

"Duran doesn't seem to have any issues."

"I think he still has some growing up to do, but I haven't noticed him having any issues beyond that. Duran tends to be a lot more socially comfortable than Lane. Although I think that Lane is a lot more level headed in a crisis."

"You seem to know them pretty well."

"We see a lot of each other. We all work for Duran's father... well, we *actually* work for the entire Shadeside community, but Duncan signs our paychecks."

"Right, because direct sunlight doesn't bother them..."

"It still bothers them to some degree, but not nearly as badly as it does the others." Kevin corrected simply, then quickly said, "We're

almost there. As soon as we arrive, Bruce is going to take us to the site. While we're doing that, his people are going to be working on clearing everyone out of the park, so there won't be any issues when you call in the police and the FBI."

"Do you think that they disturbed the site? Because if they did, that might raise some questions."

"You can ask Bruce about that when we get there. I'm sure that he probably did his best to preserve the site for you."

"So once we're at the scene, everyone's going to leave?"

"We'll have to see where it's located. Most likely we'll leave you at the nearest park entrance where it's relatively safe so that you can conduct your people to the scene on your own."

"That sounds like a good way to go."

"I'm glad, because we're here."

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts, this is Bruce, he works for Rafe."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Agent Roberts said as he offered his hand to the tall, ruggedly attractive man.

Bruce looked at the hand, then at Kevin uncertainly.

"We haven't had time to fill him in on everything yet." Kevin said simply.

After another moment of hesitation, Bruce took hold of the offered hand and shook it firmly.

"Your hand is freezing!" Agent Roberts exclaimed with surprise.

"Shadesiders have lower body temperatures than Brightsiders." Kevin explained simply.

"We should get moving. I've already given the word for our people to pull out."

Agent Roberts and Kevin followed along as Bruce led their way.

* * * * *

The cross country trek was less stressful than the one earlier. They traveled at a reasonable pace and sometimes took a less direct route that was easier to traverse.

"Do you think that you'll be able to find your way back here on your own or would you like for me to stay with you to help?"

"I don't know how we'd explain your presence."

"I'm sure that we could come up with something reasonable, but I'd rather not have to talk to the authorities if you can handle it on your own."

"I think that I'll be able to manage."

"Good. It's just up ahead." Bruce announced.

Agent Roberts took a moment to quickly scan around with his flashlight before continuing on.

* * * * *

"The first thing you notice when you enter this clearing is the animal carcases, but I think the more interesting thing is the ripped up clothes over there. Devin probably ripped them off when he was in transition." Bruce said as he gestured around.

"I'm curious to know what explanation the Brightsiders will be able to come up with for that, since they won't consider anything to do with vampires or werewolves." Kevin said honestly.

"Has Rafe been able to confirm that Devin *is* a werewolf?" Bruce asked cautiously.

"Yeah. He seemed to be pretty sure about it." Kevin said gravely.

"Does he know if it's a new variant of the transformative?"

Kevin seemed to be at a loss for how to respond, so Agent Roberts said, "He thinks it's something to do with Devin's biology, some sort of nutritional deficiency. He never mentioned anything about the transformative in Devin being different from anyone else's except to mention how it had changed itself to adapt to Devin's unique biology."

"Good. The last thing we need is *another* form of the transformative going around." Bruce said with relief.

"Agent Roberts is concerned that when he brings his investigators in, that there might be some evidence that someone other than Devin and LeGrue had been here. Have you noticed anything like that?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"I already thought of that. We've done our best not to touch anything here. I think the scene is as pristine as you could want. I asked Cherish and Bellamy to do a careful sweep of the area where you captured Devin, there shouldn't be anything left there to incriminate anyone when they're done."

"Those are the people who helped Lane and Duran catch Devin." Kevin said to Agent Roberts in a low voice.

"So, is there anything else that you need to do before I call in the reinforcements?" Agent Roberts asked Bruce carefully.

"Not that I can think of. My people should be mostly gone by now and the last of them will be out of here before your reinforcements arrive."

"All that's left is to go back to the park entrance and set everything into motion." Kevin quietly added.

Agent Roberts scanned around the gruesome clearing one last time with his flashlight before indicating that he was ready to go.

* * * * *

"I don't know how you did it Rookie. But it looks like you found what you were looking for." Agent Simmons said as he looked around the 'nest'.

"What I was looking for was Devin, alive and well. So no, I didn't. But hopefully this is a step in the right direction."

"Are you sure you didn't see or hear anyone else while you were out here?"

"No. I just followed what looked to be a recent path through the woods. I didn't come across anyone else."

"Well, these are the clothes that the boy was wearing, or what's left of them." Agent Simmons said as he pointed, then continued, "And it looks like we've found the missing pets... good call on that one, by the way. There's no doubt that they were taken for food."

"Since you have more experience with things like this, maybe you can tell me, what are we supposed to be doing right now? With the investigators on the scene, I just feel like I'm in the way."

Agent Simmons laughed, then with an evil glint in his eye he responded, "Now we write reports."

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Senior Agent Medville, director of this office."

"I'm sorry that I didn't get a chance to meet you before. I was called out on a mission as soon as I arrived. We just got back."

"Yeah. Well, you're not going to get a chance to meet me now, either. You're being transferred out."

"What?"

"You'll be expected to report for duty in two days. Here are your new orders."

"I didn't request a transfer. They can't just relocate me without notice."

"Actually, if you'll read the fine print of your employment contract, you'll find that they can." Agent Medville said frankly, then added, "You'd better clear out your desk and start packing. Two days."

Agent Roberts watched in astonishment as Agent Medville walked out of the room.

"Do you think that this has anything to do with your report for the Devin Barnes case being classified and closed so suddenly?"

"I know that they don't have to explain their reasoning to me but I'd really like to know what that's all about. I mean, there wasn't *anything* of a sensitive nature in that report. And we didn't even find Devin or his kidnapper. Honestly, I still have no idea what it is that I'm supposed to know that I'm not allowed to talk about."

"Welcome to the bureau." Agent Simmons said with a weary chuckle, then asked, "Where are they transferring you to, anyway?"

"Waxell, Kentucky."

Book 2: Southseid

Chapter 5

"Hello?"

"Just a minute, I'm back in the office. Who's that?"

"Agent Shawn Roberts. I'm supposed to start working here tomorrow... I think. Am I in the right place?"

"Yeah. Sorry about the confusion. I have a sign requisitioned, but they keep messing it up. 'Right for the FBI office and left for the bait shop', how hard is that to understand?" Conrad asked as he finally walked into the room.

Agent Roberts stared uncertainly, obviously not knowing how to respond.

"My name is Conrad Fastbeck and I'm the director and... at least until tomorrow, the only employee of the Waxell FBI field office." Agent Fastbeck said as he offered his hand.

"But this office has jurisdiction of nearly a third of Kentucky and a quarter of Tennessee." Agent Roberts said disbelievingly.

"It's mostly just uninhabited land, really. If you look at the way the boundaries are drawn, we don't actually have any cities within our jurisdiction." Agent Fastbeck said as he withdrew his hand.

"I *did* notice that the zone map looked a little... abstract." Agent Roberts cautiously admitted.

"Yeah. Between the mountain terrain and avoiding heavily populated areas, we ended up with a district that looks like a dog's hind leg."

"Now that you mention it, I suppose that it does." Agent Roberts said with surprise.

"Have you found a place to stay yet?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he motioned for Agent Roberts to take a seat across the desk from him.

"No sir. I just arrived in town a few minutes ago and came directly here." Agent Roberts said anxiously.

"Please call me Conrad." Agent Fastbeck said as he took a seat behind the desk, then continued, "I can ask around and see if anyone knows of a place for rent. I can't think of any right off the top of my head."

"I'd appreciate that." Agent Roberts said quietly.

"If you just got into town, then you haven't eaten yet, have you?"

"No. I came directly here... at least, I did as soon as I realized that the bait shop and the FBI office shared the same front door."

"Come on, I'll treat you to lunch at the luxurious Waxell Diner." Conrad said with a teasing grin as he stood.

"You really don't have to. I just stopped in to see if there's anything that I need to know before I start work tomorrow."

"I haven't had lunch either. We can talk some business while we're eating." Conrad said as he led the way to the door.

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When Agent Roberts reached the door, he was surprised to see that Agent Fastbeck had turned and gone down the hall to the bait shop.

"Hyatt, I'm going to lunch. I'll be over at the Waxell Diner if anyone needs me."

Agent Roberts could hear someone responding, but couldn't make out what was being said.

"Thanks. Would you like for me to bring you anything back?"

"Yeah. I'll do that." Agent Fastbeck said before turning around and walking toward the entry door.

Agent Roberts followed along uncertainly.

* * * * *

When they stepped outside, Agent Roberts was surprised when Agent Fastbeck started walking down the sidewalk.

He didn't want to say anything to upset his new boss, but after a certain point he felt that he had to ask, "Why do you park so far away?"

"Actually, my car's parked behind the office. But the Waxell Diner's only two blocks down." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

Agent Roberts was unfamiliar with 'walking' as a mode of transportation and wasn't quite sure what the etiquette was in such a situation, so he took the opportunity to survey his surroundings.

The town was clean. There wasn't any litter or graffiti visible on the main street. There were a few people out and about, doing their daily business, and at one point a car drove by.

"It's so quiet here." Agent Roberts finally said.

"Yeah. It takes a little getting used to, especially at night." Conrad agreed, then motioned across the street, toward the Waxell Diner.

Agent Roberts was surprised when Conrad suddenly changed course and stepped into the street.

He quickly looked up and down the road and found that there was no traffic coming from either direction as far as the eye could see.

Agent Roberts hurried to catch up to Agent Fastbeck.

* * * * *

When they walked into the Waxell Diner, it took a moment for Agent Roberts' eyes to adjust to the much dimmer light inside.

He looked around the place and approved of what he saw.

Back in DC, he had often enjoyed visiting a particular fifties themed restaurant.

His comfort was short lived however as he noticed that he and Agent Fastbeck appeared to be the only people in the place.

"Arn? Harry? Is anyone here?" Conrad called into the kitchen.

"Agent Fastbeck? Is that you?" A man's voice called in return.

"Yeah. There's two of us here for lunch. I'm going to grab us a couple cokes. Is that alright?"

"Go ahead and help yourself. Harry'll be out just as soon as we can get this stove moved back into place."

"We'll be fine for a while. Take your time." Conrad called, then stepped behind the counter and took two bottles of coke from the cooler chest.

After popping the tops off of them, he motioned for Agent Roberts to walk with him to a booth at the back of the dining room.

Agent Roberts followed along as he began to realize that the fifties 'theme' might not actually be a theme at all.

"As you might have guessed from the hustle and bustle around here so far, the job isn't very exciting. I'd say that most of the time when I get called out, it's for something that doesn't have anything to do with the bureau at all. The locals just see the 'F' in FBI and automatically call me when it's anything more severe than a car accident."

"What about trafficking and more serious crimes like that?"

"Good question. I'll let you know when we have some." Conrad said with a grin, then added, "Unless you count the 'X-Files' cases, there really isn't much going on that has anything to do with us."

"'X-Files'?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously and looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"Yeah. You'd think that a place like this with virtually no drug problem would have *fewer* reports of unexplained phenomena, but it turns out that we get more than our fair share of alien abductions and the like."

"You're kidding."

"Nope." Conrad said simply, then continued, "The thing is, as bizarre as some of the reports are, I'm determined that our office will investigate each incident as thoroughly and methodically as though it were a credible threat against the president himself."

"But isn't it a waste of time and resources to investigate outrageous claims like that?"

"No. I really don't think it is. These are the people who pay our salaries. We're here to investigate and provide answers for them. They trust in our training and skills to find them the answers that they can't find for themselves."

"Do you know what you want, Agent Fastbeck?" The waiter asked as he hurried up to the table.

"Harry, this is Agent Roberts. He's going to start working with me tomorrow."

"It's nice to meet you Agent Roberts. I'm Harry and I'll be your waiter. Would you like to look at a menu?" Harry asked quickly.

"Yes. Please." Agent Roberts cautiously responded.

"Okay. I didn't bring any with me. I'll be right back." Harry chirped cheerfully before dashing away.

"Is he for real?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"Oh yeah. It would never even occur to Harry to be anything less than completely genuine."

"Freaky." Agent Roberts said under his breath as he looked around the empty diner again.

Agent Fastbeck smiled wistfully at his wonder, remembering how not too long ago he had been in a similar state.

"Here you go." Harry said as he placed menus on the table, then quickly added, "Dad told me to tell you that he's going to be making some homemade ice cream today. It probably won't be ready before you're done with your meal, but if you want to stop by later for pie and ice cream, everything will be fresh."

"Apple pie?" Agent Fastbeck asked with a smile.

"No. Rhubarb, but... give me a second."

Before Conrad could stop him, Harry hurried away.

"Did you save these people's lives or something? Is that why they're so desperate to please you?" Agent Roberts asked disbelievingly.

"No. They're just really decent friendly people. I understand that after the big city it can be a little disorienting. I had no faith left in humanity when I arrived here. But if you decide to let your guard down with them, you won't be disappointed."

"So you understand where I'm coming from when I say that I'm getting a strong 'fifties' vibe from this place. Right?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yes. Of course."

"If you recall, people of my 'skin tone' weren't treated very well back in the 'good old days'." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"If I recall? Just how old do you think I am?" Agent Fastbeck asked with a laugh.

"You know what I mean. Do you think that any of these 'decent' 'friendly' people are going to have a problem with a black FBI agent living in their lily white community?"

"Dad says that if you'll agree to come back, he'll make an apple pie too." Harry said as he hurried back to the table.

"Thank him for me." Agent Fastbeck said with a smile, then thought to add, "As long as I don't get called out on a job, I'll be here."

"I'll tell him." Harry said happily, then asked, "Are you ready to order yet?"

"Yes. I'll have a cheeseburger and fries." Conrad said simply.

"What would you recommend?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked at the menu.

"The roast beef's really good today. If you're really hungry, a roast beef sandwich with some of Dad's beef barley soup would probably fill you right up." Harry said earnestly.

Agent Roberts looked to Conrad for guidance.

"That actually sounds better than a hamburger to me. I'll have the soup and a sandwich." Conrad said decisively.

"Make that two." Agent Roberts immediately added as he closed his menu.

"I'll have that for you in a few minutes. Would you like more cokes to go with your meals?"

Agent Fastbeck looked at their nearly empty bottles, then said, "Yes. That sounds like a good idea. Thanks Harry."

Agent Roberts nodded his agreement.

Harry hurried away as both men watched.

"So, do you think there'll be a problem with *me* being here?" Agent Roberts persisted.

"I don't know." Agent Fastbeck said honestly, then explained, "Since I've been here I haven't heard of a single report of any racially motivated incidents. I can't say for sure that there aren't any, but if there are, they're really good at keeping quiet about it."

"I don't know what it is, but there's something creepy about this place. It's just too quiet." Agent Roberts said anxiously.

Agent Fastbeck looked across the empty restaurant and through the large windows, out to the empty street.

After a long silent moment, Agent Fastbeck looked back to his companion and quietly said, "It's become my home."

"Are you *trying* to freak me out?"

Conrad smiled, then said, "I'm just saying that as creepy and backward as this place is, it kind of grows on you. The longer you stay here, the harder it is to ever want to leave."

Agent Roberts looked at Conrad appraisingly for a long moment, then seriously asked, "I need for you to be honest with me about something. The job, is it just marking time and drawing a paycheck or do you feel like you actually provide a service of some kind?"

"That's hard to say. It's kind of subjective." Conrad said simply, then explained, "But I guess the way I see it is that not only do I get to help people when they need my help the most, but when I participate in a significant event in their lives, I almost become part of their family, helping them to get through their problems by going through it with them."

"So every time you go out on a job, you adopt more of a family?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yeah. In a way, that's what this community is, one large family. If you stay, it *will* consume you. I guess that you'll have to decide for yourself if that's a bad thing or not."

"It sounds like you've already made that decision."

"I have. But that's the right choice for me. Another choice may be right for you. If you decide that you're not going to be able to make it here, let me know as soon as possible. I'll get you transferred out as quickly as I can."

"You talk about this place almost like it's a trap or something." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"Maybe it is, for some. For others it's a haven. I guess it all depends on how you look at it."

* * * * *

"Here's your food." Harry said as he approached the table.

Conrad picked up the menus and cleared a place for Harry to place their meals.

"That smells WONDERFUL!" Agent Roberts said as the food was set before him.

"I told you it was a good batch." Harry said proudly as he placed their drinks.

"Always listen to Harry. He knows what he's talking about." Conrad said with an appreciative smile.

"Can I get you anything else, Agent Roberts?" Harry asked timidly, blushing at Conrad's praise.

Agent Roberts had to finish chewing his bite of food before he answered, "You can call me Shawn. After suggesting something this incredible, you've earned the right."

"Thank you, but I couldn't. You're a 'Federal' agent. It's important to me to show you the proper respect."

Agent Roberts' eyes went wide at Harry's earnest declaration.

"Thanks Harry. Even though you've never put it into words for me before, I think I always understood how you felt." Conrad said sincerely.

"Let me know if either of you need anything at all. I'll be in the kitchen helping Dad." Harry said As he turned to leave.

"Harry. Wait! Agent Roberts is going to need a place to stay. Do you know of any rental properties in the area that are vacant?"

"The only one I know of is the old Granby place. As long as you're not planning on raising pigs, that might be good for you."

"What's wrong with raising pigs?"

"According to the neighbors, they're too noisy and they smell really bad."

"I don't plan on raising *anything*, so it shouldn't be a problem."

"I'll ask Dad if he knows of any other places." Harry promised, then continued, "I've got to get back to the kitchen. He needs my help with the cleaning."

"We'll yell if we need anything else." Conrad said with a smile.

Harry returned the smile, then dashed away.

After a moment, Agent Roberts finally asked, "Seriously. What *planet* have we landed on?"

"I know." Conrad chuckled, then said, "And it's not just Harry. Pretty much the whole community is like that."

"Unbelievable."

Conrad nodded his agreement, then started eating his lunch.

* * * * *

After a few quiet minutes of eating, Agent Roberts cautiously asked, "What did they tell you about why they assigned me here?"

"Nothing. Not a word." Conrad said simply, then added, "What's more, I didn't request additional personnel. When I received notice that you were being transferred in, I was surprised, to say the least."

"My last assignment was... I suppose you'd call it an X-File. Even though there was nothing in my report that was the least bit sensitive, it was still classified."

"And you think that had something to do with you being posted here?"

"I submitted my report last week. It was immediately classified and I received notice of my reassignment two days later."

"So, do you see your posting here as being some form of punishment?"

"I don't know yet. It's possible that they put me here so that you could straighten me out about... nonstandard cases. Or maybe they just want to throw all the crazies in the same corner where they can be ignored."

"It could be both."

"Doesn't it bother you that our superiors might look at you as a crackpot?"

"It might have when I first arrived. But now I see myself as performing an important service to the community."

"Forgive me for asking, but I need to know... do you believe in aliens and other unexplained phenomena?"

"I believe in what I'm able to quantify and verify to a reasonable degree. So far I haven't investigated anything that causes me to believe that aliens exist, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to disregard testimony or evidence from those who do."

"I guess that I can get onboard with that approach."

"Does that mean that you're planning on staying?"

"I'll stay long enough to find out what's really going on. I can't promise anything beyond that."

"That will work for now, but I have a feeling that at some point you're going to have to fully commit one way or the other."

"What do you see as my choices?"

"At this point I would guess that it might come down to your career or the truth."

"Did you have to face that choice?"

"My choices were a little different."

Agent Roberts nodded slightly, but didn't feel that it would be appropriate to inquire further.

* * * * *

"If you're finished, we should be going." Agent Fastbeck said as he dropped a few dollars on the table.

"Thank you for buying me lunch, but I need to get to work finding a place to stay tonight. I didn't notice a motel on the way into town, do you know where one is?"

"Mrs. Shumlin's boarding house is the closest thing we have to a motel here, but let's talk to Arn and see if he knows of any places available for rent." Agent Fastbeck said as he led the way to the cash register.

"You really don't have to go to all this trouble. I'm sure that I'll be able to find something on my own."

"It's no trouble, and besides, I have a better idea of who to talk to to find you a place and most people around here know who I am."

"I can't argue with that."

"Arn? Have you got a minute?" Agent Fastbeck called into the kitchen.

A moment later a middle-aged man with a delighted smile hurried out of the kitchen, drying his hands on a dishtowel.

"Agent Fastbeck! It's wonderful to see you again. I was just working on your pie crust. I have a feeling that this is going to be a good one."

"They're all good. Your pies are the best." Agent Fastbeck said with a smile, then continued, "Arn, I'd like to introduce Agent Roberts. He's going to be working with me, starting tomorrow."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Agent Roberts. Welcome to Waxell." Arn said as he offered his hand to shake.

Agent Roberts looked warily at the offered hand for a moment before cautiously accepting it and giving Arn a firm handshake.

Agent Fastbeck detected a slight amount of relief seep into Agent Roberts' expression.

"We were hoping that you might know of a decent place for rent." Agent Fastbeck interjected.

"There's the old Granby place, of course, but you said 'decent'. From what I've heard, the Granby kids have really let that place go."

"Can you think of anyplace else?" Agent Fastbeck asked hopefully.

"Gil Spencer has that mother-in-law cottage that he's not using. With Lorna off to college, Gil could probably use the extra money coming in." Arn said thoughtfully.

"That might be worth checking out. The Spencer place isn't too far from town." Agent Fastbeck said with a slow nod.

"The only other place I can think of at the moment is the Tennyson place. Warren'd probably let you stay there for free if you'd agree to take care of it for him."

"Why would he do that?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"He refuses to ever set foot on the property again. He claims that it's haunted."

"Um. No." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"You might want to consider it, Roberts. I mean, *free rent*. You just don't find a deal like that every day."

"A couple weeks ago I might have thought about it. I might have even enjoyed the challenge of *investigating* it. But after what I've just been through... no. When I get home from work, all I want is a nice simple life."

"If that's what you're after, you're looking in the right place." Agent Fastbeck assured him, then thought to ask, "Do you want to go and ask about the cottage at the Spencer place?"

"Before I say 'yes', what *is* a mother-in-law cottage?"

"It's a building that's on the property, but far enough away from the main house so that it affords privacy to both the occupant and the property owner."

"I wouldn't mind looking at it." Agent Roberts said cautiously, half sure that he was making a mistake.

"I'll call Nancy and let her know that you'll be stopping by."

"Thanks, Arn. Could you fix me a Sanka to go? Then I'll be ready to pay out."

"Is that Sanka for Hyatt?"

"Yeah. That's how I pay him back for watching the office for me while I'm out."

"I'll throw in a couple extra creamers, then."

* * * * *

After paying the bill and collecting the Sanka, Agents Fastbeck and Roberts walked back to the office.

Agent Roberts stood aside while Agent Fastbeck delivered the Sanka and made small talk for a few minutes.

As he was waiting, Agent Roberts took out his phone to check his messages.

"Are you ready to go?"

"I'm not getting a signal." Agent Roberts said as he held his phone up and out from him while he moved around the hallway.

Agent Fastbeck tried to restrain a smile as he watched the bizarre choreography Agent Roberts went through to try and 'summon' a signal.

"There's no cell service here." Agent Fastbeck finally explained.

"What?"

"There's no cell phone service provider in this area. There's no signal to 'get'." Conrad said more slowly.

"Is that even possible?" Agent Roberts asked as he stared at his phone.

"When you report for duty in the morning, I'll work on requisitioning you a sat phone." Agent Fastbeck promised, then continued, "But for right now, we need to be on the way to the Spencer place. We wouldn't want to keep Nancy waiting."

"There's no cell service *at all*?" Agent Roberts asked disbelievingly as he continued to stare at the phone in his hand.

"No. My sat phone is the only mobile phone that I'm aware of in the entire Waxell area."

* * * * *

"Do you want to go with me or drive your own car and follow along?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he stopped on the sidewalk.

"How likely do you think it is that I'll choose to stay in the mother-in-law house?"

"Knowing what little I do of the Spencers, it's probably nice... quaint even. But I can't predict how you'll react to it. If you don't like it for some reason, we can always swing north and check out the Granby place.

"I think it'll have to be pretty bad for me to choose the pig farm."

"Is this yours?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he indicated the Camry with Maryland plates parked in front of the office.

"Yeah."

"I'll drive around and you can follow me."

Before Agent Roberts could respond, Agent Fastbeck walked briskly around the side of the bait shop/FBI office, to the back.

Shawn got into his car and looked at his phone again, feeling bewildered at the sense of 'disconnection' from the rest of the world.

A car pulling to a stop near him snapped him out of his thoughts and he started his engine.

* * * * *

The drive to the Spencer place was... delightful. In fact, it was almost Disneyesque. The scenery was beautiful. There was not one thing to distract from that beauty. It was almost *too* perfect. In his experience, *nothing* so beautiful turned out to be real.

When they finally came to a stop in a long driveway, Agent Fastbeck motioned for Agent Roberts to follow him.

Reluctantly, feeling more than a little creeped out by the unrealistic fantasy scenery, Agent Roberts finally followed.

As they approached the front door, it opened and a modestly attractive and unrealistically happy woman appeared. In that first moment, all that Agent Roberts could think was that this woman must have gone to the same training academy as Donna Reed and June Cleaver.

"Agent Fastbeck! Arn told me that you'd be stopping by. This must be the new agent who's going to be working with you." She said with such delight and cheer that Agent Roberts was certain that her meds needed to be drastically adjusted.

"Nancy Spencer, may I introduce Agent Shawn Roberts, he'll be starting with me tomorrow." Agent Fastbeck said formally.

"It's so nice to meet you Agent Roberts. I'm sure that you're going to be a great help to Agent Fastbeck." Nancy said warmly, then quickly asked, "Can I get you anything? I have some homemade cookies, or some peach tea if you're thirsty."

"Thank you, no. We've just come from the Waxell Diner. We couldn't possibly eat another bite." Agent Fastbeck said with a tender smile at her.

"Well then, I know you didn't come all this way to chat with me, so why don't I take you out to the cottage and you can see what you think of it?"

Before either could respond, Nancy hurried back into the house.

"She seems..." Shawn began to say, but was stopped when Nancy dashed back out with a set of keys in her hand.

"I haven't been out there in a week or two, but Gil's been going out a couple times a week to see that the place is alright." Nancy said as she walked past them and started leading the way away from the house.

"How long has it been since anyone lived there?" Agent Fastbeck asked curiously.

"Well, Lorna stayed out there for a few weeks, but didn't like the sense of isolation, so she moved back into the house with us until she left for college. Before that, the last person to stay in the house was my mother. When she was about... ninety-six, I think, she took a fall and we moved her into the house with us where we could keep an eye on her."

"How long ago was that?" Agent Fastbeck asked curiously.

"It's been a few years, but I can't quite recall. If it's important, we can stop in and ask mother when we get back to the house."

"No. It's not important. I was just curious." Agent Fastbeck assured her.

Agent Roberts was only half listening to the conversation as he realized that where they were walking couldn't even be counted as a 'path'. He had eerie flashbacks to a particular city park as he made very sure to stay close to Agent Fastbeck and Mrs. Spencer.

"You should know that if there's a heavy rain, that the driveway will flood. It's never been a problem, but if you leave your car at the bottom of the drive, it *could* be damaged." Nancy warned.

"I'll keep that in mind." Shawn muttered uneasily as they walked deeper into the woods.

"So even though this house is on the same property, it's completely isolated from your house in every way, is that right?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"We share a mailing address, but I suppose that if you asked Ethyl, she'd come up with something unique for you. But as far as utilities and the like, everything's been kept separate all along."

"Ethyl's the town's mail carrier... and postmaster... and I think she's in charge of the phone system in town, too." Agent Fastbeck said thoughtfully.

"Ever since they took down the switchboard, she hasn't had as much to do, so when Pete Slattery finally retired from the post office, she took over for him." Nancy explained.

"You'll get to meet her when she drops off our mail at the office. You can talk to her about getting your own address then."

"If I decide to take the place." Agent Roberts interjected.

"I forgot to mention, the cottage is furnished. We've never had a reason to empty it out. Is that going to be a problem for you?" Nancy suddenly asked.

"No. I only have my suitcase and a few other things in my car." Shawn immediately answered.

"Then it sounds like a perfect situation for you. If you like the place, you could move in tonight." Nancy said cheerfully.

"How much farther is it?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Just around this bend and over a rise." Nancy said simply.

"Are there any wild animals that live in these woods that I should know about?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked around.

"Every now and then you'll hear something moving through the woods or baying at the moon in the distance, but as far as I recall, no one's had any problem with wild animals in the past thirty years or so. Left to themselves, the wildlife seem to keep their numbers in check." Nancy said pleasantly, then quickly added, "There it is!"

Chapter 6

The only way the cottage in the woods could seem more like a fairy tale would be if it were made out of candy.

Shawn couldn't give a rational explanation for his discomfort except to say that it was 'too perfect'.

"Would you like to do the honors, Agent Roberts?" Nancy asked as she offered him the keys.

"Um, yeah. Sure." Shawn reluctantly agreed as he accepted the keys from her.

With Nancy and Agent Fastbeck flanking him on either side, Agent Roberts forced himself to open the front door of the cottage, even though a part of him very much didn't want to.

As the door swung open, Agent Roberts caught his first glimpse of the living room.

"Well? How is it?" Agent Fastbeck asked from over his shoulder.

Shawn had to give an internal push to make him take his first step inside.

"This place is *incredible*! Some of these furnishings belong in a museum. That sofa has to be at least two hundred years old." Agent Fastbeck said in a voice of quiet awe.

"It's beautiful." Shawn reluctantly admitted.

"We'll be asking three hundred dollars a month, but we'll understand if you need a few days to get your things together to pay us for the first month." Nancy finished sympathetically.

"Three hundred... dollars? A month?" Shawn stammered.

"I probably should have prepared you for that." Agent Fastbeck said with a grin at Agent Roberts' dumbfounded state.

"Is that too much?" Nancy asked with concern.

"No. That's fine." Agent Fastbeck quickly assured her, then explained, "The economics are a bit different back in DC. It can just be a bit of a shock if you're not prepared for it."

"Three hundred... a month." Shawn said disbelievingly.

"Just give him a minute. He's nearly got it." Agent Fastbeck said warmly.

"Would you like to take a look at the rest of the place? I'm sure you'll want to see the master suite before you make a decision." Nancy said cautiously.

"Yes. Of course." Agent Roberts was finally able to say.

"Welcome back." Agent Fastbeck said with a grin.

Agent Roberts glanced at him and realized just how dramatic his reaction had been.

* * * * *

Nancy led them down a hallway off the living room and turned right.

When Agent Roberts followed, he was astounded to see the enormous room that they entered.

"This was originally a parlor for entertaining, but sometime around 1940, it was made into a master suite, so that Mrs. Helson, my husband's great-grandmother, wouldn't have to deal with the stairs."

"It's amazing." Shawn whispered.

"The water closet is right over there. I'm afraid that we haven't gotten around to updating it, so there still isn't a shower, but you have a rather nice claw foot tub in there... big enough for two, if you're so inclined." Nancy said with a slight blush rising up her cheeks.

"Good to know." Agent Roberts said as he walked over to the biggest bed that he had ever seen and sat down on the edge of it to get a sense of the firmness of the mattress.

"The linens are in the hall closet. They were laundered not too long ago, they should still be fresh enough." Nancy added as she watched his inspection.

"What about laundry facilities? Do you have anything like that here?" Agent Fastbeck asked seriously.

"Yes. They're in the utility room, just off the kitchen. Although they're twenty or thirty years old, they seem to work well enough. If the washer starts giving you trouble, just call Gil. He has a long history with these appliances and knows how to set them back to right."

"That's good, because I wouldn't have a clue of where to begin." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"If you've seen all that you need to in here, I'll show you the guest room." Nancy said pleasantly.

"This *room* is bigger than my whole apartment in DC, and you're saying that there's even more?" Agent Roberts asked in astonishment.

"Just the guest room, the dining room and the breakfast room off the kitchen." Nancy said as she led the way into the hall.

"Three hundred a month..." Shawn said as he shook his head in wonder.

"That is, unless you count the bedrooms upstairs. But that's been closed off since Mrs. Helson moved to the ground floor." Nancy said as she guided them down the hall and into another room.

This one wasn't nearly as big as the master suite, but it was of a decent size and was tastefully decorated.

"With a room like this, I could invite my sister down to visit for a few weeks." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"So have you decided?" Agent Fastbeck asked with a smile, then added, "We still have plenty of time to go look at the pig farm, if you want to."

"I don't think that will be necessary. Unless there's something else that I need to know about, I'd be crazy not to take this place." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I can't think of anything..." Nancy said slowly, then quickly amended, "Gil has a deal with the Beckle boys to provide us firewood, so you won't need to worry about that. If you ever run short, just call Gil and he'll see that it's taken care of. Besides that, the only other thing I can think of is the orchards to the east of here. When everything starts coming ripe, we get a group of people together to help us with picking. I wouldn't want you to be surprised if you unexpectedly find an unknown group of people on the property."

"Thanks for the warning." Agent Roberts said sincerely.

"Of course, you're welcome to help yourself to as much of the fruit as you want from the orchards. We sell off what's left so it won't go to waste."

"I'll do that." Shawn said quietly, obviously overwhelmed by it all.

"Do you want to stay here and get settled in or go back to town with me for pie and ice cream?" Agent Fastbeck asked with a smile.

"I don't have that much... but I'm going to need someone to show me where the driveway is. I assume that I'm not going to be walking cross-country to get here every day."

"I'll show you that on our way out." Agent Fastbeck assured him.

"So, do we have a deal?" Nancy asked with a smile of anticipation.

"Yes. I think we do." Agent Roberts said gently, then thought to ask, "Should I pay you now?"

"You can if you like. But I'll understand if you need a few days to get your affairs in order."

"No. That's no problem." Agent Roberts said as he took out his wallet and extracted three one hundred dollar bills.

When he handed them to her, he noticed the puzzled expression that she wore.

"Those are the new hundreds. The government redesigned them a few years ago." Agent Fastbeck assured her.

"Since you're from the FBI, I'll take you at your word. But they look for all the world like play money to me." Nancy said as she examined the bills.

"They do to me too." Conrad admitted.

"If there's nothing else that you'd like to see, I'll take you back to the house." Nancy said as she folded the bills and tucked them into a discretely hidden pocket in her dress.

* * * * *

"Did I just make a horrible mistake?" Agent Roberts asked as they walked through the woods at an unhurried pace.

"Good question. I guess there's only one way to find out." Agent Fastbeck said with a smile.

"I've taken one more step toward being 'consumed' by this place, haven't I?"

"It looks that way."

"Did the same thing happen to you?"

"No. I stayed at Mrs. Shumlin's boarding house until I made the commitment to stay. Once I had decided, I *bought* a house." Agent Fastbeck said seriously.

"Is it as nice as this place?"

"My house is northwest of town and sits on about seventy acres of unspoiled woodland. It's the place I would have dreamed of owning one day if I had the first clue that such a place actually could exist."

"I'm still a little up in the air on that one myself. All of this seems a little too... fairy tale, to be real."

They walked for a moment in silence, then Agent Fastbeck finally responded, "In fairy tales, beauty is often offset by horror. Peace is purchased with blood. In our line of work, we're bound to run across the dark underbelly of things eventually."

"Would you stop talking to me in riddles and just say what you mean to say?"

"Enjoy what you have while you have it."

"But what do you know about the 'dark underbelly'?"

"I know about good people leading very sheltered and protected lives. They're people that I've come to care about and I want to continue sheltering and protecting them. The dark underbelly may actually be the outside world intruding on this place... I don't know. But I'm convinced that I'm here... *we're* here, to use our skills and knowledge to help these people."

* * * * *

When they arrived back at Nancy's house, they said their goodbyes to Nancy, then got in their cars. Agent Fastbeck led the way down the long drive, then about a quarter mile down the road to a secluded driveway, which led to Agent Roberts' cottage.

"Do you need any help carrying things in?"

"I don't have much, but if you want to help, we can get it all out of the way right now. It should only take a couple minutes."

When Conrad walked to the trunk and saw the contents, he quietly said, "You're going to need to use the computers at the office until you've had a chance to get a few things ironed out."

"Do they not have high speed internet here?" Shawn asked as he grabbed a few suitcases from the back seat.

Conrad picked up the large iMac and followed as he said, "They actually don't have *any* internet here."

"None at all?"

"Well, if you have a phone line and an old fashioned modem, you can use dial-up. Beyond that, the only other option that I've been able to find is a specially configured satellite ISP. That's what we have at the office. I've been considering getting it at home, so if you decide to do it, we can schedule it together. The guys have to drive in from Louisville to do the installation."

"What about television? Is there cable?"

"Nope. Broadcast only. And the two local broadcasters don't have satellite feeds from the major networks, so they mostly play old movies and some of the older syndicated television shows. From what I've overheard at the diner, The Mary Tyler Moore Show is becoming very popular in Waxell right now."

"Just set that down by the couch and I'll find a place for it later, after I've had a chance to explore." Shawn said as he set down his suitcases, then said, "Be straight with me. Do you have any idea of what's going on around here? Because it seems hard to believe that you could be here, working for the FBI, and not at least have some *sense* of what's causing this."

"I don't *know*. And the few things that I've been able to put together don't form enough of a picture for me to get a sense of it. Waxell seems to exist in a bubble, not completely separate from the outer

world, but not fully a part of it either. What's causing it or why... I really have no idea. But the honest truth is, I don't exactly want it to change, either." Conrad said as they started walking back toward the car.

"Is this the X-File thing that you were talking about?"

"That or The Twilight Zone, but I can't detect any malicious intent behind it all. No one's getting hurt and everyone seems to be happy. Where's the harm in it?"

"It's a lie. This isn't reality. These people deserve a chance to..."

"...to what? To be exploited by a system that they didn't create? To be beaten down and have everything left to them by the generations before taken away in the name of modernity? What possible benefit would there be for them *or* for the outside world? Who would it serve?"

"What about that 'dark underbelly' you were talking about?"

"I still haven't found it. But if and when I do... I may have to reevaluate my stance on things."

"Yeah. Okay. I can respect that."

"Let's finish hauling this stuff in. We have homemade pie and ice cream waiting for us back in town."

"Is it really *that* good?"

"No. It's *better*."

* * * * *

As Shawn drove back to town in his own car, he had a few private moments to collect his thoughts.

Agent Fastbeck had been nothing but nice to him since the moment they had first met, and yet Shawn couldn't help but feel that he was hiding something.

Truth be told, Shawn himself was hiding something too. Every time they discussed 'X-Files' and he didn't reveal the surprising truths that he had uncovered, he was in essence lying.

Setting all that aside, there was something seriously wrong with the town where he had been stationed.

But he couldn't help but wonder if Agent Fastbeck were right. Whatever weird incomprehensible thing was happening in Waxell might be something precious that should be preserved and defended.

He might also be right about there being a dark underbelly. The strong and the weak. The rich and the poor. The Darksiders and the Shadesiders. The residents of Waxell and... that was the big question, wasn't it? And he wasn't alone in asking.

Given what little he knew about Agent Fastbeck's circumstances, he supposed that he might be behaving just as strangely if their positions were reversed.

As he followed Agent Fastbeck down the alley to park behind the FBI office, he came to the conclusion that he would do his best to follow Agent Fastbeck's lead and try to understand what they were facing.

* * * * *

"I didn't think to ask before, you don't mind walking from the office do you?"

"No. That's fine. I'll probably need to burn off some calories if the pie is as good as you say it is."

"You won't regret it."

"Conrad, can I ask you something?"

"Yeah. Ask whatever you want."

"Why us?"

"I once met a man who had the responsibility to protect and defend an entire village. ALL the decisions were his, as was ALL the responsibility. One wrong decision on his part could lead to their annihilation."

"Are you saying that we're going to be something like that?"

"No. What I'm suggesting is that it's possible that someone in a position such as that has arranged for us to be right here, right now."

"For what?"

"I don't know. I'm not at all certain that *they* know. We may just be contingency plans or safety valves if others of their plans don't end up working out as expected."

"So you think that someone in the chain of command is staffing this office with people who have a particular mindset, in hopes that we'll be motivated to react in a favorable way should a certain situation take place."

"I'm saying that it's possible. *Why* would they create a bizarrely misshapen district which intentionally leaves out metropolitan areas if not in an attempt to contain some specific information that we might run across?"

"But you have no idea what that is." Agent Roberts said in a leading tone.

"I don't know for sure that there *is* anything. It's all just a theory." Agent Fastbeck said as he started to cross the street.

"So you don't get the sense that we're being drawn toward a particular action?"

"No. If anything, I get the sense that we're being held in reserve."

"But you have no idea what for."

"None."

"What about your X-File cases? Could one of them have some bearing on this?"

"While that's always possible, so far I haven't come across anything that would connect any of that to what's going on in Waxell or beyond it. Until and unless I can find some sort of connection, I'd rather just leave that be."

Shawn thought about the people that he had recently encountered and came to the conclusion that as long as no harm was being done, that they should be left to live in peace.

* * * * *

"Agent Fastbeck! Agent Roberts! I'm so glad that you could make it." Arn said happily as they walked into the diner.

"Thank you." Agent Roberts muttered in surprise.

Agent Fastbeck guided Shawn into the diner and up to a particular woman.

"Agent Shawn Roberts, may I present Tracy Manson. She works as a waitress here. I know that these young men with her are her sons, but I have to admit that I can't remember their names." Agent Fastbeck finished with a timid smile.

"It's nice to meet you, Agent Roberts. Harry has been telling me about you." Tracy said pleasantly, then continued, "These are my boys, Otis and Harlow."

Agent Roberts thought that it would be inappropriate to mention that Tracy appeared to be far too young to have adult children. Besides that, he would prefer not to do anything that might prompt her to explain how that could be.

Nothing good would come of it.

"It's nice to meet you Agent Roberts, welcome to Waxell." Otis said pleasantly.

"Thank you." Agent Roberts said with surprise at the sincere and friendly welcome.

"Are you ready for some of the best pie and ice cream that you've ever tasted?" Agent Fastbeck asked with a smile.

"Have a seat and we'll start serving. We've just been waiting on you." Arn interjected.

"Why?" Agent Roberts asked confusedly.

"We decided to make this a welcome party for you. It's not every day we have someone new moving into Waxell." Arn explained.

"Well, thank you for that. I honestly never imagined that anyone would care one way or another."

"We're not going to put on a big to-do. But Ben Pickley, the mayor, and Sheriff Daniels should be stopping in before very long to welcome you to town."

"It's how they do things here." Agent Fastbeck quietly explained.

Agent Roberts wasn't having a problem with the concept, but it still seemed like a disproportionate reaction to his arrival.

Otis surreptitiously moved to Agent Roberts' side and quietly said, "I know that this place can seem a little weird. If you have any problems, I'll help you out if I can."

"So you can see it too?" Agent Roberts asked with surprise.

"I'm from here, so I probably don't see as much as you do. But when I was away at college I realized just how different it is here."

"But you came back. Weren't you tempted to make a life for yourself in the outside world?"

"Not really." Otis said simply, then explained, "To me, this is normal. The 'outside world' is crowded, noisy and moves too frantically. I'm not sorry that I visited, but I'd never want to live there. Everyone seems so mean and selfish... and sad."

"Yeah. I guess I can see that."

"Like I said, if you're having any problems understanding how things work around here, let me know."

"Thanks Otis. I'll do that."

* * * * *

Arn and Harry hurried to serve pie and ice cream for all those in attendance.

As the 'guest of honor' Agent Roberts was the first to receive his plate.

"You were right. I've never tasted anything that was even close to as good as this." Shawn reluctantly admitted.

"I didn't choose to stay *just* because of the food, but I'm not at all disappointed to know that I'll be able to enjoy desserts like this on a regular basis."

"Agent Fastbeck! Don't hog the guest of honor all to yourself. If he's going to be staying, he's going to need to circulate and get to know people." A woman said sternly as she approached.

Both Agents Fastbeck and Roberts stood to greet her.

"Agent Shawn Roberts, allow me to present Dorra Linda Rhodes. She's the principal at the local elementary school and she also teaches third through fifth grade classes along with her other duties." Agent Fastbeck said formally, then turned to Dorra Linda and asked, "Did I get that right?"

"Yes. I'm flattered that you remembered." Dorra Linda said honestly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Ma'am." Agent Roberts said respectfully.

"It's a pleasure for me as well. I never would have thought that the FBI would be staffed with such gallant gentlemen."

"The bureau does its best to see that we are prepared to function in a variety of situations." Agent Fastbeck said pleasantly.

"Perhaps one or both of you could stop by the school sometime to talk to the students about career opportunities in federal law enforcement. I think it would benefit the children to have actual examples, in the flesh, of what they might one day aspire to be." Dorra Linda said warmly.

"Of course. If you'll just let me know when you have time in your schedule, we'll arrange something." Agent Fastbeck said professionally.

"Agent Roberts." A voice said from nearby.

He turned at the sound of his name and saw Otis leading an older man.

"This is Ben Pickley. He was wanting to meet you." Otis said with a smile.

"*Mayor* Pickley?" Agent Roberts ventured.

"Oh? Has someone been talking about me?" Mayor Pickley asked with delight.

"Only to tell me that I might be meeting you." Agent Roberts explained, then continued, "I'm Agent Shawn Roberts from the FBI."

"I was surprised, to say the least, when Agent Fastbeck was stationed in our little town. I'm actually dumbfounded as to why there would be *two* federal agents located in Waxell." Mayor Pickley said honestly.

Agent Roberts didn't know how to respond, but fortunately, Agent Fastbeck stepped up and said, "As far as I know, we've been stationed here to oversee an entire geographic region. I'm not aware of it having anything to do with Waxell specifically. This just seemed to be a good place for a base of operations."

"Is the government finally going to do something about those little green bastards who've been pestering us?"

"Yes, Mayor. Along with our other duties, Agent Roberts and I are tasked with investigating every report of alien sightings and abductions within our jurisdiction." Agent Fastbeck assured him.

"Good. It's obviously been too much of a job for the sheriff's office." Mayor Pickley said sourly.

"We have enough of a job keeping the peace among our *human* residents." A man's deep voice said from nearby.

Agent Roberts turned to see that the person who had spoken was, indeed, wearing a sheriff's uniform.

"Sheriff Daniels, I'd like for you to meet Agent Roberts. He'll be working with me at the FBI office starting tomorrow." Agent Fastbeck said respectfully.

"I've been impressed with how Agent Fastbeck handles an investigation. It's good to see that he's going to have some help. I think we've got enough crackpots and lunatics to keep two people busy." Sheriff Daniels said with a look askance at Mayor Pickley.

"Just wait till those green bastards take you up in their ship and start *probing* you. Then you'll be singing a different tune." Mayor Pickley challenged.

"That wasn't aliens, Ben. That was too much whiskey and your brother Leroy." Sheriff Daniels said frankly.

"Agent Roberts?" A timid voice intruded.

Shawn turned and saw Harry holding out a dessert plate with pie and ice cream toward him.

"I thought you might like to try some of Dad's rhubarb pie." Harry said cautiously.

"Thank you Harry. I'd love to try it." Agent Roberts said as he traded his empty dessert plate for the one with pie and ice cream.

"Would you like some Sanka to go with that?"

"I don't think so. I'm trying a lot of new things today. I think it's probably best if I ease into it. Maybe next time."

"Did you end up getting the 'mother-in-law house'?" Harry asked curiously.

"Yes. I'd like to thank you and your dad for suggesting it." Agent Roberts said with a sincere smile.

"I'm glad you like it." Harry said happily, then quickly said, "I'll be right back. Mayor Pickley needs some more pie."

Agent Roberts watched with a smile as Harry hurried away.

* * * * *

The pie was simply *amazing*. Shawn didn't know what he was expecting, but it wasn't something so incredibly good.

"Before it gets too late, remember that you're going to need to stop by the store and get some food. Otherwise you won't have anything to eat at your house." Agent Fastbeck said quietly from his side.

"I didn't even think about that. Thank you." Agent Roberts said sincerely.

"If you're ready, I'll walk over to the market with you, in case you need help carrying your groceries back to the car."

"I can just drive over there... once I know where it is."

"You can if you want, but it'll probably end up being a lot more trouble than just walking there from here. It's right around the corner."

"Okay. I'll take your word for it." Agent Roberts finally relented, then walked to the lunch counter and asked, "Harry, how much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. This was a party to welcome you to town." Harry said with a smile.

"I never imagined being welcomed anywhere so warmly. Thank you, and be sure to thank your dad for me." Agent Roberts said sincerely, then thought to add, "The rhubarb pie was wonderful. Thank you for getting me to try it."

"I'm glad you liked it." Harry said with a beaming smile.

* * * * *

"So, you didn't have anything to do with that, did you?" Shawn asked cautiously as they left the diner.

"With what?"

"Organizing a 'welcome' party."

"Oh, no. They came up with that all on their own."

"I could see what you meant about them believing in aliens. Although the sheriff seems to have debunked the mayor's story fairly well."

"I wasn't here when that incident occurred, so I can't really comment specifically on the investigation. Although, from what little I know of it, I would be interested to see the results of a toxicology test on the mayor that night. Overindulging with alcohol doesn't typically produce such... vivid results unless you're in the advanced stages of chronic alcoholism."

Agent Roberts slowly nodded as he considered Agent Fastbeck's words.

"But as far as Leroy's involvement, it wouldn't surprise me a bit. I get the feeling that Leroy would bugger just about anything, given the chance."

"Good to know." Agent Roberts said uneasily.

"This is the M&K market. It's the only thing remotely resembling a grocery store in Waxell."

"It's a convenience store."

"Basically, yeah. If you need something more than what you can find here, you'll have to drive into Gooseneck."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"For dry goods, you might be able to find what you're looking for at the drugstore or over at the feed store, which doubles as a hardware."

"I think it may take me some time to get used to all of this."

"Once you get past the expectation of 'one stop shopping', it's not too hard." Agent Fastbeck said easily, then quickly added, "You'll also need to remember that they don't have a gas station here in town. Don't let yourself run too short."

"Why don't they have a gas station?"

"I suppose it's because they wouldn't have enough local business to support it. The gas station out on the interstate services several small communities like this one, so it has enough traffic to make it viable."

Conversation stopped as they walked into the little 'mom and pop' market.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts wasn't much of one for cooking.

He could manage a microwave dinner or cup-o-noodles in a pinch, but given the choice, he was much happier ordering delivery or driving through for take out.

Even so, he supposed that he could manage a simple meat and potatoes dinner for himself if he really needed to.

After he had gathered a few items into his handbasket, Agent Fastbeck put a cautious hand on his shoulder and quietly asked, "You don't have a clue of what you're doing, do you?"

"Does it show?"

"Yeah. I'm not saying that you couldn't do *something* with a slab of fatback and five pounds of rutabagas but... would you mind if I helped you?"

"I hate to ask after all the trouble you've already gone to, but I've never really had to cook for myself before. I'm completely lost."

"Put this stuff back and I'll help you pick out a few things that are a bit more *flexible* to work with."

"Thanks."

* * * * *

After picking up a few staple pantry items, along with the steak and potatoes that Agent Roberts thought he had been buying before, Agent Fastbeck thought to ask, "Did you happen to notice if there were any pots and pans in the kitchen?"

"No. I don't think we even went into the kitchen. I just saw that it was there as we passed by."

"I think we're going to need to stop by the feed store before it closes. I'd loan you something of mine, but I've only got the absolute basics at my house."

"If you can show me what the basics are, I'd really appreciate it."

"I think we've got what you'll need for a few meals. Let's check out. We don't have a lot of time."

* * * * *

After a trip to the feed store, Agent Fastbeck wished Shawn well and sent him on his way, back to his new house.

Although the temptation was great to invite him along, he knew within himself that he needed to take this step into the unknown on his own.

Arriving at his house, he stopped for a moment to appreciate the beauty of the place in the diminishing daylight.

Back in DC, he couldn't have dreamed of ever living in such an incredibly beautiful place.

When he was finally able to force himself to stop gawking and get to work, Shawn loaded the groceries and other purchases into the house.

It turned out that there were a few pots and pans left in the kitchen, but he didn't regret the purchases that he had made. Agent Fastbeck had assured him that the assortment that he bought would be suitable for the majority of his frying, stewing and baking needs.

After getting the food put away and the pots and pans squirreled away where he could find them when he needed them, Shawn went about the business of unpacking.

Since he hadn't brought much in the way of material possessions with him, the task wasn't too terribly daunting.

He found that there was a little nook off the dining room with a desk that seemed to be ideal for his computer. Although he immediately recognized the need for more outlets, and of course an internet connection, he was able to get his computer set up and operational in a reasonable amount of time.

As he was going through his suitcases, putting away his clothes, he heard a knock on the door.

Intrigued, he put down what he was doing and went to answer it.

* * * * *

"Hello?"

"Agent Roberts?"

"Yeah."

"My name is Gil Spencer. Nancy said that you rented the house from us today."

"Yes. That's right."

"Nancy said that you told her that you'd be starting work tomorrow and she was worried that you might have your hands full with unpacking and such, so she sent me over with a casserole for you."

"Thank you. Please come in." Shawn said as he stood aside.

"I won't be able to stay. I just wanted to drop this off and let you know that you're to call us if you have any problems at all."

"Everything seems fine so far. But if there's a problem, I'll let you know."

"Just be sure to call us before it becomes a *big* problem. I'd rather be told about a dripping faucet than a flooded basement." Gil said as he walked at a casual pace toward the kitchen.

"Is there a basement?" Shawn asked curiously.

"Yes. Go out the back door and the door's to the left, about ten yards or so. It's mostly just for storage. My wife's mother used to do a lot of canning, so if you come across any of her canned goods down there, you're welcome to them." Gil said as he set the casserole on the stove.

"Will they still be good after all this time?"

"That's the point of canning them." Gil said simply, then added, "If the seal hasn't been broken, they should be fine."

Shawn nodded that he understood.

"It's nice to meet you, Agent Roberts. If you run into any trouble, even if it isn't something to do with the house, you call us or come on up to our place. You hear?"

"Yes sir."

"I don't answer to sir. Name's Gil."

"If you say so, Gil. But if that's the case, then I expect you to call me Shawn."

"You got a deal, Shawn." Gil said with a grin, then added, "Welcome to Waxell."

Chapter 7

As Agent Roberts drove away from his cottage on the way to work, he reflected on the previous evening.

Although he had been ready to swear that he wasn't hungry after all the pie and ice cream that he had eaten, the enticing aroma of Nancy's casserole had eventually changed his mind.

The casserole was warm, flavorful and filling. It almost made him long for the childhood that he never had.

The childhood that he *actually* had was filled with a variety of activities, both school related and otherwise. Every minute of every day was scheduled for him. He was expected to be at full energy for every bit of it... and he was. But not without a price.

When he and his sister were at home, they were constantly being pushed and hounded to work harder, to learn more, to become their absolute best selves.

Although he couldn't be sure if his memory were playing tricks on him, Agent Roberts couldn't remember any point in his 'childhood' when he had been allowed to *relax*. He certainly couldn't remember being allowed to do anything so frivolous as to 'stop and enjoy' a meal, simply for the pleasure of it. Pleasure in any form was unfortunately off the menu. He and Michelle had never been encouraged to *play*. In fact, if they were ever caught *playing*, they would immediately be scolded and redirected to some other, more productive, activity.

Shawn looked upon his parents almost like prison guards. One of the guilt tactics his parents had used to motivate them was to go on and on about how much they had sacrificed and the misery they were enduring to provide Shawn and Michelle the most opportunities in life.

He had thought that when he joined the military that he would be out from under their control and his life could begin.

However, it turned out that his parents had done their jobs too well. Shawn carried their pushing and prodding with him and avoided forming any meaningful relationships. He worked himself to the point of exhaustion and then berated himself for not pushing further and being the absolute best at every single thing he attempted.

As a result, when Shawn was recruited to the FBI at the end of his tour of duty, he automatically took on the challenge, never even *considering* if it were something that he actually *wanted* to do.

He toughed it out through all the research and desk work. Not once did he ever consider if he *should* have joined up. It was just the next rung on the ladder, so he went for it with one hundred percent dedication and determination.

That was his life. It was history. No changing it. The canvas of his life thus far was a wash of one insipid color. There were no defining events. There were no notable achievements, because he always achieved everything that he had been set to do.

The only thing that kept all of it from being a complete waste was Michelle. He had no doubt that his care and concern for her were the only things that had kept him human. He had to survive. He had to excel. He had to forge a path... for her. If he were to give up, if he were to give in to his most secret thoughts and let the mad scramble to the top finally end, then she would be left alone with no one to depend on.

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts pulled into the parking area behind the FBI office, he saw that Agent Fastbeck's car was already there.

Although Agent Roberts was going through the motions of being the up-and-coming FBI agent, something within him had fundamentally changed. His brief encounter with the Shadeside had

seeded ideas within him about humanity and morality that he'd never had to deal with before.

Finding that he had been assigned to work with Agent Fastbeck on the unofficially designated 'X-Files', had turned out to be less troubling for him than it might have been before. There was certainly a desire to investigate and understand what was really going on. But at the same time, Shawn had been deemed worthy of trust and allowed to remember secret things that very few other outsiders knew. With the forbidden knowledge that he carried, he had the opportunity to make a unique contribution. He could change lives. He could achieve something simply for the fact that he actually *believed* in it.

For the first time, the choices before him weren't black and white. In this endeavor, his beliefs and desires would have to be taken into account. Not only could he make a difference, but it was possible that the outcome could be determined by him. Due to his unique perspective, it was possible that *he* would be the only one with the objectivity to determine right from wrong in a given situation.

* * * * *

As he walked into the FBI office, he heard Agent Fastbeck call out, "I got you some coffee. It's on the desk."

Shawn was surprised by the friendly gesture.

When he had been shopping the previous evening, he hadn't thought about picking up coffee and felt the lack of it when he had been driving to work.

"Thank you." Shawn called back to him, then picked up the coffee, noticing that Agent Fastbeck had left him packets of creamer and sugar.

"How are you doing this morning?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he walked into the room. "I didn't know if you liked coffee or not, so I took a chance."

"This is great. I'm in the habit of driving through to get coffee on the way to work in the morning. If I'd thought of it, I would have picked some up yesterday when we were shopping." Agent Roberts said honestly before taking a sip.

"Just so you know, if you take your coffee cup by the Waxell Diner on the way into work, you can walk in and fill it up with no charge."

"How can they make any money if they keep giving things away like that?"

"That's just for us, law enforcement, I mean. Everyone else has to dig deep and come up with twenty-five cents a cup." Agent Fastbeck finished with a grin.

Agent Roberts couldn't think of a response to that and just shook his head slowly as he thought about the typical five dollar cup of coffee he would usually pick up on the way to work.

"Well, despite appearances, we actually *do* have things to do this morning, so we'd better get to it." Agent Fastbeck said seriously.

"Okay. I'm ready. Just tell me what we're doing."

"Well, what *I'm* doing is creating a timeline based on eyewitness testimony regarding an event out near Buckthorn last week. What I'd like for *you* to do is start working your way through the top drawer of the file cabinet. Those are the most recent and active investigations. I'd like for you to take some time to get familiar with them."

"Where do you want me to work?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked around, only spotting the one desk.

"Right here. This is technically the reception area. I'll be back in my office." Agent Fastbeck said as he indicated the door behind him.

"This cabinet?" Agent Roberts asked as he pointed beside his desk.

"That's the one. Feel free to ask any questions that you have. I wrote most of those reports, so if I didn't explain something clearly, I can probably fill in the blanks from memory.

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts made his way through the reports, he couldn't help but agree with Agent Fastbeck's assertion that the area seemed to get more than their fair share of 'X-Files' cases.

One particular case caught his attention and before he could think about what he was doing, he carried it with him as he knocked on Agent Fastbeck's door.

"What's up?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he looked up from his desk.

"As I was looking through the files, I came across this case from Grovers Station and had a few questions about it." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"I'm pretty sure everything I know is in the report. Three hikers went out into the mountains and two came back. Matthew Farmer is officially listed as missing, presumed dead."

"So his body was never recovered?"

"No. By all accounts the three of them were hiking and suddenly they noticed that Matt was missing. That's the whole story."

"Would you mind if I went there and poked around a little bit?"

"You want to drive out there right now?"

"Yes. If you wouldn't mind. This just bears some slight resemblance to another case that I've been on and I'd like to take what I learned on that one and apply it to this."

"Okay, but if you're going to do this, you'll need to take my car. There's a CB radio in there that you can use to stay in contact with the civilian authorities. Remember, we're all on the same side of things, don't be afraid to ask for their help."

"I'll do that." Agent Roberts assured him.

"You'll also need to take my sat phone with you so that you can contact me with any information requests that you might have. The office landline is programmed into the contacts."

"I don't want to leave you stranded here."

"Then leave me your car keys. I probably won't be called out, but that way if I am, I won't have to go knocking on doors for someone to drive me to the crime scene... things like that kind of chip away at our credibility."

Agent Roberts smiled as he fished his car keys out of his pocket.

"Are you okay with me going? I mean, is there something else that you'd rather I be doing right now?"

"I've done everything that I can think to do with the cases that you've been reviewing. If you have an idea of how to progress an investigation, then you have my full support."

"Thanks. I appreciate the amount of trust that you're placing in a person who's a virtual stranger to you."

"Don't forget that you've only officially been on the job for an hour and forty-five minutes." Agent Fastbeck said with a grin.

Agent Roberts collected the keys to Agent Fastbeck's car and the sat phone before leaving.

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts got onto the interstate, he decided that he'd try his cell phone.

He was happy to find that he was able to get a clear signal and immediately speed dialed.

"Shelly? Can you talk?"

"*Shawn? Did you get there alright? Did you run into any trouble? Why didn't you call me when you arrived*?"

"Hold on! Give me a chance to answer." Shawn chuckled, then continued, "It turns out that my assignment is in a dead zone. I can't get any cell phone signal at all. The only reason I'm able to call you now is because I'm on the road, going out to investigate a case."

"*So you're alright?*"

"Yes, Shell. I'm fine. You wouldn't believe the house that I've rented. It's like a dream."

"*So everything's okay? All of a sudden you just seemed to drop out of sight.*"

"I'm an FBI agent, Shell, that's kinda what we do."

"*I guess it's better than you being in some war-torn third world hellhole. But I still worry about you.*"

"How are things going with you? You've got to be close to graduating by now."

"*I think I've got that in the bag. But just as soon as I've gotten my MD, I'm going to have to work on getting board certified. I'm a little more worried about that one.*"

"You'll do great. But if you need a break from the studying, think about coming to Waxell and spending a few weeks with me. It'll probably do you some good to get away from the pressure for a while."

"*Ever since you started with the FBI, Mom and Dad have been focusing all their attention on me. If I even stop to take a breath, they're both right on top of me, forcing me back on task.*"

"Someday you're going to have to stand up to them and start living your own life."

"*Both of them have devoted their lives to making sure that we're both successes. Since you've gone, I'm all that they've got left. What are they going to do If I bail out on them too?*"

"You're letting their guilt trips get to you. This isn't healthy. They're adults. They need to develop their own interests and lives independent from us. You buying into their manipulation isn't helping them at all."

"*That's easy for you to say. You just dropped out of their lives and abandoned them. You didn't even call them to wish them a happy anniversary.*"

"Shell, I'm sorry if you don't understand why I'm doing this. I promise that I'm not doing it to hurt you. But if I'm ever going to be my own person, I've got to break their stranglehold on me. If I stay in close contact with them, they'll suck me right back in and I might never escape."

After a few seconds of silence, Shelly quietly said, "*The pressure is killing me.*"

"I know." Agent Roberts said sympathetically, then gently added, "Think about coming to visit me in Waxell. It will be a chance for you to get away from everything for a while."

"*Okay. I'll think about it.*" Shelly finally responded.

"I've got to go. I have a few business calls to make."

"*Thanks for calling me... and for not cutting me out of your life.*"

"I love you, Shell. Part of why I'm doing this is for you, to show you the way."

"*I love you too. Bye.*"

* * * * *

"*Hello?*"

"Theresa Alsup?"

"*Yes. Who is this?*"

"Agent Roberts from the FBI. I was wondering if you'd be available to talk with me for a few minutes?"

"*Have you found Matt? Is he alright?*"

"No. I'm sorry. There haven't been any new developments in the case, but in reading his case file I noticed a few similarities to another case, so I thought that I'd try to see if they might be related."

"*I don't understand.*"

"If you're available to speak with me for a few minutes, I'd like to ask you some questions. I can't promise that this will do anything to find your friend, but at least you'll know that we haven't given up. We're still investigating."

"*Yeah. Where and when do you want to meet?*"

"I should be there in about ten minutes. If you can tell me where you'll be, I'll meet you there."

"*I could meet you at the entrance to the library... do you want to talk to Doug, too?*"

"Yes. I was going to call him next."

"*He's here with me. We'll both meet you at the library when you arrive.*"

"I'll see you then."

* * * * *

"Theresa?" Agent Roberts asked as he approached.

"Call me Teri. This is Doug." She said anxiously as she indicated the young man next to her.

"Thank you for meeting with me. I'll try not to take up too much of your time."

"That's okay. If it'll help Matt, we'll do whatever we can." Teri assured him.

"Can you tell me about the area where you went hiking? Is it a popular hiking trail?"

"I wouldn't call it *popular* but most of the locals know about it. There isn't really a *trail* to speak of, but if you go due north, you'll end up at the lake. It's beautiful up there and it's not too bad of a hike." Teri explained.

"So the three of you decided to go up to the lake, just to enjoy the scenery and relax for a while?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"Yeah. It was a nice day and it was something to do." Teri said simply.

Agent Roberts looked at Teri for a long moment, then turned his gaze on Doug.

"Sometimes it's just nice to get away." Doug muttered somewhat defensively.

Agent Roberts slowly nodded as he kept his gaze fixed on the young man who was beginning to squirm under his scrutiny.

"It doesn't matter anyway. We never made it there." Teri suddenly interjected.

"What happened?" Agent Roberts asked in response, but kept his gaze steadfastly focused on Doug.

"I don't know. The three of us were hiking and then, all of a sudden, Matt just wasn't with us anymore. We called out to him, but he never answered." Teri said helplessly.

"Doug, would you mind stepping over here and talking with me privately for a moment?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"What? Why?"

"I just have something to ask you and I thought it might be more comfortable for you if I asked you about it privately."

Doug looked uncertain, but started to step away.

"This will just take a minute." Agent Roberts assured Teri, then guided Doug to walk down the sidewalk a little way, to stand with him under a tree.

* * * * *

"Before I ask you any questions, I just want for you to understand where I'm coming from. The only reason I'm here is to investigate the disappearance of your friend Matt. I'm not interested in whatever else you and your friends might have been up to, except for how it relates to my investigation. So if I were to discover that the three of you... let's say, had a grow hidden in the woods, I wouldn't care except inasmuch as it might give a motive for Matt's disappearance. Do you follow me?"

"What's a grow?"

"A secret pot growing operation."

"Oh. Um, okay." Doug said nervously.

"So, why don't you tell me the truth? What was *really* going on that day?"

"Matt wanted to try having sex with a girl." Doug said with a blush rising up his cheeks.

"Excuse me?"

"Matt's gay and we were talking and... well, Teri likes him and... we were going up to the lake and the three of us..."

"The *three* of you?"

"Yeah. Matt said that he probably wouldn't be able to get it up if it was just him and a girl and since he and I had done some stuff..."

"Hold on. That's actually *more* than enough. So why don't you tell me what happened that day? Where did it all go wrong?"

"It's just like Teri was telling you. We were hiking up to the lake and somewhere along the way, Matt must have fallen behind or gone in a different direction. All of a sudden, he just wasn't with us anymore."

"So you weren't having a fight or anything like that?"

"He was a little bit nervous, but I'm pretty sure that he wanted to go through with it. I mean, I said that if he'd try it with Teri that I'd be willing to try letting him... you know... do me... since I'd never..."

"Again, *more* than enough." Agent Roberts interrupted, then asked, "Do you recall any unusual sounds, like movement in the underbrush or animal sounds?"

"No. I mean, there might have been, but if there was, it wasn't anything that you wouldn't expect on a hike."

Agent Roberts slowly nodded, then carefully asked, "Did Matt say anything about someone stalking him or following him around at all?"

"No. He never mentioned anything like that... and he would have. We were that kind of friends."

"Can you think of *anything* that might indicate that there was a 'person' behind his disappearance?" Agent Roberts asked seriously.

"No. Do you think that someone took Matt?" Doug asked anxiously.

"The main reason that I'm asking is because of what happened in another case that I worked on. So far there's nothing to imply that the two cases are in any way related, but I just thought I would pursue this line of questioning on the off chance that it might produce some satisfactory results."

"Everyone who knew Matt liked him, but Teri and I are just about the only people who were close to him."

"Forgive me for asking you this, but I'd like to get your point of view. What do you think Teri's motivation was for engaging in... your plan?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"She liked Matt. I mean, she's been his friend for years, but she's always lusted after him. I knew that and when Matt said that he'd like to try it with a girl, I kind of arranged things."

"Would you mind staying right here for a few minutes while I talk to Teri privately?"

"You're going to tell her that I told you, aren't you?"

"I'm going to ask her to tell me the truth from her point of view. Since she's been watching us talk, that might be enough."

"Either way, she's probably going to be pissed off at me forever."

"Sorry about that. I'm not trying to make things difficult for you, I'm just trying to find your friend."

"Go ahead. Do anything you can think of to find him."

Agent Roberts nodded, then walked back to Teri, who had been watching their every move.

* * * * *

"Slow down." Doug said firmly.

Agent Roberts thought that he had been going slow, but applied the brake to bring his borrowed car to a crawl.

"It's up here on the right. It's really hard to see." Doug said as he pointed.

"Thanks for going up here with me. There's no way I would have found this on my own."

"That's probably why the locals are the only ones who go up to the lake. No one else can find it."

After following the dirt road a short way, Doug finally said, "That's about as far as you can go. From here we'll have to go on foot."

"How long of a walk is it?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"It's just about an hour from here to the place where Matt disappeared."

"And you just travel due north?"

"Yes. There aren't really any landmarks along the way. It's a straight shot north from right here."

"Are you up to a hike?"

"Are you going to hike in that suit?" Doug asked dubiously.

"Yeah. Actually, I'm getting more and more used to it."

Doug shrugged, then flipped up the face of his wristwatch to reveal the compass beneath.

As they began to walk, Agent Roberts decided that he should get something like that for himself. Considering that both cases that he had worked on in the field so far had involved hiking through wooded areas, it would seem that a compass watch would receive much use.

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts?"

"Yes?"

"Can you tell me your first name?"

"Shawn."

"Thanks."

* * * * *

"Shawn?"

"Yes?"

"Have you ever been with a guy?"

"No. And 'no', I'm not curious. And 'yes', I'm sure."

"Oh."

"Sorry if that disappoints you."

"That's okay. I'm supposed to be going steady with Teri right now... just every now and then I feel like doing something different."

"I'm not going to tell you how you should run your life, but if you're willing to have sex with some random guy that you just met, it's probably best that you're not telling Teri that you two have some type of commitment to each other."

"It's okay. She doesn't mind if I mess around with the guys sometimes. Just as long as she's the only woman in my life."

"You know what? If the two of you are happy, then who am I to judge?"

"What about you, Shawn? Are you sold on the whole 'monogamous, one man, one woman, forever and ever, amen' thing?"

"I'm not at a point in my life where there's any reason for me to even think about it."

"How does that work?"

"I just put it out of my mind and focus on more important things. When a time comes that I'm seeking companionship... or intimacy... then I'll take a good look at the situation that I'm in and the options available to me."

"That's just weird."

* * * * *

"It's around here somewhere." Doug said as he stopped.

"Is that where you noticed that Matt was missing or the last place that you remember seeing him?"

"This is where we noticed that he was missing. If you want to backtrack a little, I'll show you where we last saw him."

"Hold on. Be quiet for just a minute." Agent Roberts said as he closed his eyes.

As he slowly turned his head, he listened as carefully as he could.

"Do you hear that?" Agent Roberts quietly asked.

"What?"

"Something moving, maybe... it could be water... whatever it is, it's over that way." Agent Roberts said as he pointed behind them.

"I don't hear anything."

"Stay on the path. I'm going to go down this hill to see if I can track down that sound."

"Don't you want me to go with you?"

"No. I'm counting on you to keep us oriented so that we can find our way back."

* * * * *

After scooting down the hillside and forcing his way through heavy underbrush, Agent Roberts finally made his way to the source of the sound.

His hopes fell as he walked up to the pool of water being fed by a natural spring.

"Doug?! Can you hear me?!" Agent Roberts called upward, but received no response.

"Help..." A voice whispered from nearby.

Agent Roberts jumped, as if jolted with electricity at the sound.

"Hello? Is someone there?"

"Help me..." The voice said weakly, but this time Shawn could determine where the voice had come from.

As he tore at the gathered roots and moss, they parted to reveal that the small spring that he had discovered was, in fact, the mouth of a cave.

"Hello? Are you in there?" Agent Roberts asked as he tore at the covering more frantically.

"I'm stuck."

"Matt, is that you?"

"Yes. Do I know you?"

"No. Your friends Teri and Doug asked me to help look for you. Are you hurt?"

"I can't feel my legs anymore."

As Agent Roberts continued to dig and tear at the tenacious roots, he finally caught a glimpse of what they were hiding.

"Can you take my hand?" Agent Roberts asked as he stretched as far as he could.

"I don't know if I can hold on. My hands are kinda numb too... it's so cold."

"If you can just give me your hand, I'll do all the holding and pulling."

It took a moment, but finally a hand thrust out toward him.

"That's great. That's perfect. Just relax and let me do all the work. You're nearly out of there."

"Thank you..." Matt said quietly as Shawn continued to strain to pull the man out of his confinement.

* * * * *

"I don't see anything broken. I'm guessing that your legs just went numb from being submerged for so long." Shawn said as he carefully checked over the incoherent young man.

"How long?"

"Were you trapped? Just over a week. Although the hypothermia almost killed you, it also probably saved your life. Otherwise you would have starved to death by now."

"Thank you." Matt whispered as his eyes closed.

"Don't thank me yet. The only way I can think of to get you back to the car is a fireman's carry. That's probably not going to be too comfortable for you."

Matt slightly nodded with his eyes still closed.

Shawn took off his suit coat and did his best to wrap it around the chilled young man.

Suiting actions to words, Agent Roberts leaned down, then in one 'power move', hoisted Matt onto his shoulder.

It took a moment for him to get his balance, but he was soon underway, doing his best to force his way through the underbrush.

His next challenge was to try and climb the hillside wearing his black business shoes.

As soon as this mission was complete, he planned to discuss the dress code with Agent Fastbeck. He had an increasing conviction that his 'official uniform' should include hiking boots, if not a full outfit of hiking gear.

"Doug! Can you hear me?" Agent Roberts called out as he continued to climb.

"Agent Roberts? I was getting worried! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Just keep talking to me so that I can find you." Agent Roberts said with renewed determination.

"I found something while you were gone. There's a hole here, I think it's a cave. It's right here where we were walking, so Matt might have fallen into it. Do you think that there's some way we can get, like, a camera or something to lower down there to see if he fell in?"

"I have a feeling that won't be necessary." Agent Roberts called in return as he caught his first glimpse of Doug, standing amongst the trees.

"Why not..." Doug asked, then turned when he heard Shawn approaching.

"You found him! He's alive?" Doug asked in wonder.

"Yes. Very much so. He's kind of heavy. I'm going to need to rest for a minute before we hike back."

"Watch out! That's where the hole is." Doug said quickly.

"Would you take a minute to gather some rocks? Then form them into an arrow pointing at that hole. Once this is all done, I'll be sure that someone is sent out here to either cap it or put up a barrier so unsuspecting hikers won't fall into it again."

"That's a good idea. I'll take care of it." Doug said quickly.

"I'm alive?" Matt quietly asked.

"Yep."

"Who are you?"

"Agent Shawn Roberts from the FBI."

"FBI? And you rescued me?"

"Yeah. I guess I did."

"All my life I've been looking for my knight in shining armor... somehow, you're not what I expected." Matt said quietly, sounding to be half asleep or delirious.

"Are you disappointed?" Shawn asked with a smile, not at all offended by his words.

"No. The man of my dreams was a wimpy little fairy compared to you. You're better than my dreams."

"Let's see if you still feel the same way once you've recovered from the hypothermia and gotten a few good meals into you."

"How's that?" Doug asked as he indicated the stone arrow that he had put into place.

"Perfect. Anyone walking through here should at least have the presence of mind to investigate that rather than unknowingly falling in." Agent Roberts said as he worked the sat phone out of his pocket and turned it on.

"There aren't any cell phone towers out this far." Doug quietly informed him.

"This is a satellite phone, but I can't get a signal under this tree cover." Agent Roberts said seriously as he turned off the phone and got to his feet.

"Was that enough of a rest for you?" Doug asked with concern.

"Yeah. I just needed to catch my breath. I'll try the sat phone again when we're out in the open." Agent Roberts assured him, then added, "I'm going to be counting on you to lead the way. I'm going to have all my attention focused on caring for my passenger."

Doug flipped the face of his watch up, then pointed as he said, "This way."

* * * * *

"What the hell happened to you? Have you been digging in the dirt?" Agent Fastbeck asked in astonishment.

"Actually, yeah. I have." Agent Roberts said with a chuckle.

"What happened?"

"I found Matthew Farmer... alive."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Apparently he fell into a cave when they were hiking and got wedged into place right before it let out into a natural spring. We had an ambulance meet us at the road. There's no doubt that he's going to need some time to recover, but he should come out of it with quite a story to tell."

"That's one hell of a first day on the job. I can't wait to see what you're going to do next."

"Right now, I'm going to get cleaned up. Do you know where there's a good dry cleaner?"

"Gooseneck."

"Of course." Agent Roberts chuckled, then placed Agent Fastbeck's keys and sat phone on his desk as he said, "As soon as I'm cleaned up, I'll see what I can do about your upholstery."

"Yeah. Thanks. When you're done with that, you'll need to get to work on your report about the incident." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"Ungh! Reports!" Agent Roberts lamented, then quietly added, "I'm beginning to wonder if it's worth it."

"Just remember, that boy's alive right now thanks to you."

"Right." Agent Roberts said resignedly, then quietly added, "It's worth it."

Chapter 8

After getting himself mostly presentable, Agent Roberts came to the conclusion that his suit was probably a total loss. He'd give the dry cleaner a chance, but didn't hold out much hope.

While he was certain that there wouldn't be a replacement available anywhere in Waxell, it was at least possible that there would be a clothier of some sort in Gooseneck. He would ask Agent Fastbeck if he knew of any before he set off on his quest.

With the weekend approaching, he resolved himself to a road trip, not only to resupply his dwindling wardrobe, but also for some other various and sundry items that weren't available in Waxell. While attending to his other duties, Agent Roberts went about the task of composing a shopping list in his head.

As he walked back into the office, looking somewhat presentable, Agent Fastbeck said, "Shawn, this is Ethyl Turner, she's our local mail carrier."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ma'am. My name is Shawn Roberts."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Agent Roberts. Nancy told me that you're renting the Spencers' homestead. I'll start delivering your mail to the box at the bottom of your drive on Monday. Your mailing address will be Route 2."

"Will you leave me a change of address form in my box so I can fill it out?"

"I will if you like, but all I'm going to do is file it away and forget about it."

"What will I need to do to get my phone turned on?"

"I'll restore the connection as soon as I get back to the office. Your number will be 'Waxell 1132' and your ring will be two long and one short if I remember correctly. If it's anything else, I'll let you know."

"I don't know... what does that even mean?"

"Agent Roberts is going to need a dedicated 'private' line... for business."

"There's no way I can do that with the lines we have in place. The party line is his only option for the time being."

"Party line?"

"It's a phone line that's shared by a group of people. If an emergency call comes through for someone else while you're using it, you'll be asked to yield the line. Otherwise, you just work out your time usage with your neighbors." Agent Fastbeck explained.

"I guess that I'll have to make due with it until I get my sat phone."

"Yes. And if you decide to get satellite internet for your computer, you might consider a VOIP service. I'm not exactly sure how that works with the satellite lag. It may not be practical. Either way, the tech guys from Louisville should be able to answer any questions you have and explain your options during the installation." Agent Fastbeck said thoughtfully.

"I need to get back to the office now. I don't like to leave Nana on her own for too long. If you have any questions or need any help, just pick up a phone." Ethyl said before hurrying out of the room.

"She's the operator too?"

"Welcome to Waxell."

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts was diligently working on his update to the Matthew Farmer report, a movement caught his attention and he saw a young man standing in the doorway, staring at him wide-eyed.

"Can I help you?" Agent Roberts asked uncertainly.

There was a long pause, but the young man finally asked, "Is Conrad here?"

"He's in his office. Did you have some business to discuss with him?" Agent Roberts asked curiously. Something about the young man's reaction seemed to be off.

"I need to see him right now. It's an emergency."

Agent Roberts stood and motioned for the young man to follow him as he walked to Agent Fastbeck's doorway.

After a brief knock to announce his presence, Agent Roberts quietly said, "Agent Fastbeck, there's someone here to see you. He says that it's important."

"Rocky? What are you doing here?" Agent Fastbeck asked with a smile, then stood from behind his desk and hurried to the man to give him a hug.

Agent Roberts was surprised, to say the least, at Agent Fastbeck's enthusiastic greeting.

But in the few moments that the men were hugging, Agent Roberts easily came to the conclusion that the hug was one of affection, not passion. Agent Fastbeck was pleasantly surprised by the young man's visit.

"You've got to come with me right now!"

"What's wrong? Is Andrea alright?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he pulled out of the hug and looked at Rocky with concern.

"She's fine. Everyone's fine. But Andrea told me to tell you that Ima needs your help right away. It's an emergency."

"I have a job. I can't just drop everything and leave on a whim. I need to know what's going on."

"We *need* you. There's no one else." The young man said firmly.

Agent Fastbeck seemed to consider for a moment, then thought to say, "Rocky, this is Agent Roberts, he started working with me today."

"It's nice to meet you." Rocky said as he spared Agent Roberts a glance, then looked back to Agent Fastbeck and said, "You know how things are with us. If it could wait for your next visit, we would wait. But Ima said that you're needed now. Andrea told me to come into town and get you. You know that she wouldn't do that if it wasn't *really* important."

"Okay." Agent Fastbeck reluctantly agreed, then looked to Agent Roberts and said, "It's close enough to closing time that I doubt anyone will care. Why don't you get your things together and we'll close up shop."

"Is it something I can help with?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"Actually, I have no idea. I'm going to have to find out what's going on."

"If there's anything I can do, will you let me know?" Agent Roberts asked seriously.

"Yes. I will." Agent Fastbeck promised, then said, "Let's get everything closed up."

* * * * *

Since Agent Roberts had been mostly finished with his update to the Matthew Farmer report, it only took him a matter of minutes to close it out and put things away.

He was, of course, intrigued about what might be going on with Agent Fastbeck, but knew better than to intrude on what might turn out to be a personal matter. Just because someone said that something was an emergency didn't mean that it was his, or the FBI's business.

"Are you done? I need to lock up." Agent Fasbeck asked as he walked out of his office with Rocky following closely behind.

"Yeah. Will you be here tomorrow?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I plan to be, but if something comes up, I'll stop by your place and let you know." Agent Fastbeck promised.

"I hope everything goes alright for you. Remember to let me know if there's anything I can do."

"I will." Agent Fastbeck said as he ushered Agent Roberts and Rocky out the door.

"It was nice to meet you Agent Roberts. I'm really sorry about having to do this." Rocky said repentantly.

Agent Roberts could tell that the young man did, indeed, feel bad for interrupting their work day and bringing it to an early end.

"It's okay. I missed having lunch today, so I'll just count this as my lunch hour." Agent Roberts said simply.

Rocky looked at him uncertainly for a moment, then seemed to accept his response.

* * * * *

Since he was out of work early, Agent Roberts decided to do a little shopping for his new house. Considering that he hadn't eaten the food that he had purchased the night before, he didn't feel the need to go to the market, but the feed store was another matter. There were a variety of things that had caught his attention while he had been buying cookware, and he appeared to have the time to be able to browse.

His stop at the Waxell Diner was strangely quiet and uneventful. Tracy was waitressing and provided exemplary service, but Agent Roberts missed Harry's unbridled enthusiasm and upbeat attitude. He couldn't be sure if it were his hunger from having missed lunch

or if the food really *was* that good, but he could say without reservation that it was the best hamburger that he had ever tasted.

Although the bulk of the unpacking had been done the previous night, there was still quite a bit to do when he arrived back at his house.

By the time he had things placed where he wanted them, it was already past his intended bedtime.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts took a long slow drink of the coffee he had just gotten at the Waxell Diner. He was still puzzling over his conversation with Harry as he was filling his travel mug.

Somehow, and he wasn't quite sure how, he had promised to get a travel mug like his for Harry.

As he pulled into the lot behind the FBI office, Agent Roberts was relieved to see that Agent Fastbeck's car was present. Despite Agent Fastbeck's assurance, he had half expected for him not to show up at all.

As he walked into the office, Agent Fastbeck met him just inside the door. "I'm sorry to do this to you Shawn, but something's come up. I have something that I'm going to have to investigate on my own."

"Does this have something to do with Rocky and what he was telling you about yesterday?"

"Rocky was right. It *was* an emergency."

"An FBI type emergency?" Agent Roberts persisted.

"While I'm sure the bureau would be *interested* in this, I think this actually falls more into the category of something that they don't 'officially' need to be aware of." Agent Fastbeck said uneasily.

"Let me go with you."

"No. This could potentially come back to haunt you later on in your career."

"I've already made that choice... And I've paid that price." Agent Roberts said simply, then explained, "The report that got me sent here was about something that they 'officially' didn't need to know about."

"There's going to be quite a bit of hiking..."

"Just a minute." Agent Roberts said before hurrying out the door.

Agent Fastbeck went back to work, gathering selected maps as he wondered what Agent Roberts was up to.

* * * * *

"Considering that both of my last two field assignments involved hiking... and ruined my suits in the process, I decided that keeping a 'bug-out' bag of hiking gear with me might be a good idea." Agent Roberts said as he returned with a large backpack.

"It looks like you're better prepared for this than I am."

"So I can go with you?"

"If you go, it's going to have to be with the understanding that I won't be able to tell you everything."

"Yes. I understand that." Agent Roberts assured him, then asked, "What *can* you tell me?"

"There is a community hidden in the mountains. They've remained isolated from the outside world since they settled it... centuries ago."

"Something like Waxell?"

"No. I mean *complete* isolation. They haven't had contact of any kind with anyone or anything from the outside world in all that time."

"Without the influence of other cultures, I can't even imagine how a society would develop in a situation like that."

"Well, if you really want to know, get changed into your hiking clothes so that we can go. Last night I spoke to one of their people, who travelled here to ask for our help."

"If they've been so isolated, how would they know to come to you?"

After a long moment of consideration, Agent Fastbeck carefully said, "A leads to B which leads to C. I can't talk about B."

"Fair enough." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Go change. We need to leave right away."

* * * * *

"These directions you have make no sense." Agent Roberts said as he looked back to the map again.

"Imagine this. Two hundred years ago two colonies were established. While they were aware of each other's existence, they were at the same time completely independent from each other."

"Okay. I can imagine that." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"Skip ahead to now. You have to give directions to the colony that you haven't visited or had contact with in two hundred years."

"So there weren't any roads, or if there were, they might not exist anymore. Even rivers might have significantly changed their course over that period of time."

"Now, if you'll look at those directions again, you'll see that they refer to the most enduring geographical landmarks. Using those to orient us and the compass headings that they provided to keep us on course, we should be able to find the way to where the colony is supposed to be."

"The second colony, is that where Rocky's from?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"Change the subject."

"Okay. If someone from the colony went to get you, why isn't he coming back with us to show us the way?"

"He can't. He's in no condition. The trip nearly killed him."

"What happened to him?"

"He ran the entire way."

"Wait. He ran? On foot? That's over a hundred miles."

"Yes. I very nearly left early this morning after talking to him, but then I decided that it would be better if I got at least *some* sleep and started this trip during the daylight hours. I'm not so much of a woodsman that I want to start a mountain climbing adventure in the dark."

"If I'm deciphering this right with the topographical map, it looks like we're going to end up in the middle of some pretty treacherous mountains. I don't know if, between us, we have the skill necessary for this type of a hike."

"If you could have seen him, you'd know that we have to try."

"Okay. Why don't you tell me what's so dire that this person from a reclusive society would seek out help?"

"They've been discovered."

"By who?"

"By whom."

"Seriously? You're going to get all grammar nazi with me *now*?"

"They don't exactly *know* who is attacking them. They've never actually *seen* them. You see, the defense that they've always used to protect themselves is a double edged sword. It makes an impenetrable barrier surrounding their colony which also blocks anyone from seeing in."

"But at the same time, they can't see out." Agent Roberts guessed.

"Yes. At least, that's the way I understood it. It's possible that I might have misinterpreted some of what he told me. Their language is sort of... challenging." Agent Fastbeck finished slowly, obviously not entirely happy with his choice of words.

"What language is it?"

"I don't think there's actually a word for it."

"Question one..."

"Do you always number your questions?"

"No. Not always. Question one: This impenetrable place we're going to, do we have a way to get in?"

"Possibly."

"Care to explain?"

"Is that question two?"

"No, it's a follow up to question one."

"What was the question again?"

"How are we going to get into the impenetrable colony?"

"I was given a password. In theory, it should allow us to enter."

"In theory?"

Agent Fastbeck shrugged helplessly.

"Okay. I'll let that slide. Question two: Assuming that we *do* get in, then we're going to... do what? These people speak a language that we don't even have a word for. Are we going to play charades with them until we figure out what they expect us to do?"

"I can *understand* their language... sort of."

"Question two, part a: Is you telling me what the hell you're talking about going to put you, Rocky or me in danger?"

"Um, no."

"Then why won't you tell me?"

"Is this two b?"

"This is the follow up to two a."

"I won't tell you because you wouldn't believe it and I don't want you to think I'm crazy and freak out when you realize that you're trapped in a car with a complete lunatic."

"That was a more complete answer than I was expecting."

"I didn't have to stop and think about that one."

"Fair enough. But since I'm going with you, I'm going to witness whatever it is that you're not wanting to tell me, right? I mean, I'm still going to find out at some point. So wouldn't it be better to tell me now so that I have time to get used to... whatever it is?"

"Is *this* two b?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Um. Okay. What do you believe about things like ghosts, spirits, souls, gods, reincarnation and magic?"

Agent Roberts had to think about that for a moment to assess his feelings and give an accurate evaluation of them.

"If you had asked me before I entered the field, I probably would have told you that I didn't believe in *any* of that stuff. I believed that observable reality and science explained everything to a degree that there wasn't room for anything else."

"May I assume that you encountered something to change your mind about that?"

"I learned that my assumptions about reality were based on easy answers. If I didn't bother to look *too* closely, it all made perfect sense. Now... I'm open to at least considering alternative explanations."

"Good. I can work with that."

"What does this have to do with ghosts and all the rest of it?"

"Something happened since yesterday which allows me to understand their language. If I explain further, it will only divert us from more important topics."

"Okay. Question two, part c: Is whatever happened last night to teach you their language the reason that *you*, specifically, were asked to do this?"

"That's a surprisingly astute observation. To answer, I can only say that it was *one of* the reasons I was chosen. There may be others that I'm not aware of. But as far as I know, I'm the only one who could have received the ability to understand their language."

"Okay. Then it makes sense why they would send someone to come and get you, if you're the only one who could... wait. If you're the only one who can talk to them, does that mean that the person who ran all the way to Waxell couldn't tell them what was wrong when he finally got here?"

"Yes. That's correct."

"Then that explains the 'emergency' part."

"Is that all the questions?"

"No. Question three. The person who ran all the way to Waxell, is he human?"

"Define 'human'."

"I'll take that as a 'no'."

"Despite their appearance, they're not a danger to us."

"Can you just tell me what they are?"

"There isn't an accurate word in our language for them."

"Don't play games with me. What are we talking about? If all goes well, I'm going to be seeing them for myself in a few hours anyway."

"In the ancient tongue, they were called Wudewas."

"Okay. You got me on that one. I thought a name would at least give me a *clue* of what we're going to be facing."

"Physically, they're bigger than we are. But as people, they're innocent. They live in harmony with nature and with each other. They have no desire to have anything to do with us or our society. They just want to be left alone in peace."

"So they're... giants?" Agent Roberts guessed.

"Compared to us, I suppose they are. But I wouldn't label them as such."

"Turn left up here, there should be a dirt road." Agent Roberts said as he looked back at the map to confirm it.

"How long before we have to go on foot?"

"This road will take us up into the mountains, then will turn left to run parallel with the ridge. We'll need to get out and walk once we reach that turn. Depending on how this dirt road slows us down... half an hour, maybe."

"Shawn, it's very important that whatever you see in the next few hours, you not tell anyone. Some people who are very important to me could be hurt badly if the wrong person were to find out about them."

"Question four..."

"I think that I've had enough questions for a while."

"This one isn't like the others. There's just something that I want to confirm before we take off on foot."

"What's that?"

"Why did you give in and let me go with you? Is all of this some kind of a 'prophecy' or 'chosen one' thing or anything like that?"

"Not that I know of. A thing happened, another thing needed to happen to offset it. I'm the other thing. As far as your part... I never even considered bringing you along when I was planning all of this. But when you asked, I could see myself in a similar situation and I understood what you were feeling. I treated you like I would want for someone to treat me."

"Thanks. After landing in this backwoods time warp with the creepy happy people and ass raping aliens, the last thing I'd want is to find out that I have some grand destiny tied up in all of this."

"If you need a reason for being here, how about that it would be stupid for me to hike into the mountains in the middle of nowhere completely alone?"

"That's true."

"Besides, you're good company. This would have been one horribly long boring drive all on my own."

"Yeah. It probably would have been a dull day for me back at the office, too."

* * * * *

There wasn't much of an opportunity for conversation as they hiked into the mountains.

They stopped a few times to take out their maps and share Shawn's canteen as they made their way deeper and deeper into heavily forested mountains.

Just after noon, Agent Fastbeck spotted the rock formation that they had been looking for. The jagged peak was just as described and they proceeded with renewed dedication.

Once they reached the peak, they surveyed the expansive valley below and after some searching, they were finally able to find the misty hollow, hidden amongst the trees.

Relieved to have their destination in sight, the agents did their best to keep their wits about them as they forged a path to the sunken valley.

* * * * *

While it was possible to spot the location of the valley from the peak, it was impossible to determine how close they were to it on the ground.

Agent Roberts was becoming frustrated by the tangled vines, thorns and small trees that seemed to have grown in such a way as to create a barrier which would prevent them from getting any nearer to their destination.

"I think this is it." Agent Fastbeck said as he rested one hand on the tangle of weeds and vines.

"This is what? We can't even *see* the valley from here."

"That's just how it's supposed to be."

"I don't understand."

"I know. From here on out, I'm asking that you trust me."

"To do what?"

"*In the bond of blood, in the bond of pain, in the bond of shared grief, in the name of Cernunnos who oversees and protects, accept the guardians of light into your sanctuary.*"

As his last words were spoken, the formerly impervious wall seemed to give way to Agent Fastbeck's slightest touch.

"Did you just cast a spell?" Agent Roberts asked as he followed, surprised by the much dimmer light inside the barrier.

"That was the password."

"It sounded like a spell to me."

"How many *actual* spells have you heard?"

"Okay. You got me on that one..." Shawn trailed off as they emerged from the dark tangle of vines and weeds into more of a clearing. Very little of the early afternoon sunlight found its way to their location in the forest.

A low mist surrounded them, making it impossible to see the ground that they were walking on.

"Tell me again, why are we here?" Shawn asked quietly.

"Because we're needed."

"For what?"

"I don't know. Okay? I'm hoping that being here will provide me some answers so I can figure that out. What I *do* know is that I can't explain what I don't understand. I'm going where I was told that I was needed."

A large person... or animal, well over seven feet tall appeared in the mist before them.

A deep bass growl sounded which literally sent a chill up Shawn's spine.

"Your elder expects us. Lead the way and we will follow."

The animal snarled, which trailed off into a slow rumbling growl.

"Your brother is well. He completed his mission last night and is recovering his energy after his long and arduous journey."

There was another growl, then Conrad motioned for Shawn to walk with him toward the enormous beast that was shrouded in fog and shadow.

"What is it?" Shawn whispered and wasn't able to keep the fear out of his voice.

"They were once known as 'the Wudewas'."

"But what *are* they?"

"Something else. Something *not* human. I don't know much more than that. Maybe they're what we used to be. Or maybe at some pivotal point in the evolutionary process, their ancestors turned left when ours turned right."

There was a snort, followed by a brief growl as the shadowy beast stopped in front of them.

"We're to wait here. Their leader is being summoned to meet with me."

"I'm guessing that it's not in your capacity as an FBI agent."

"No. That's a little harder to explain. Let's just say for now that I live on the edge of two worlds. That gives me a certain... perspective."

Shawn thought about that for a moment and likened it to his own situation. Knowing about Shadesiders gave *him* a unique perspective. He felt better qualified than most to make certain judgements and decisions since he was aware of a greater picture.

"I'm going to have to do something now, it's necessary to prove that we're here to help... try not to panic."

"Okay." Shawn said slowly.

"And, if you wouldn't mind too much, would you take care of my clothes?"

"Do what?" Shawn asked, then was astonished to see Agent Fastbeck shrink and disappear into the fog at their feet. Something

was stirring in the fog, then Shawn took a step back as he saw a large black bird steadily growing and assuming a somewhat human form.

As Shawn was about to ask what was going on, he heard a movement and turned to see another enormous gray fur covered beast, shrouded in fog.

"At the founding, the cursed and the exiled swore to come to each others aid in times of dire need. I am here carrying the essence of Aengus MacOg to honor that oath." The bird-like creature said with Conrad's voice.

The beast snorted once, then released a slow growl that seemed to fill the entire clearing.

"I greet you, Wudewas elder. Your child delivered your message and I have come."

The growl that the creature emitted was not only deeper but impossibly louder than the one before. Shawn could feel the bass voice reverberate through him and could almost feel the vibration in his own breaths.

"Your child is well. He is recovering from his long journey. Once he has regained his strength, he will return to you."

The growling response was impossibly lower pitched and Shawn was ready to swear that he'd never heard a sound that deep before.

"Why have we been brought here? Your son only spoke of its importance, but not of what it was."

The large animal... creature... being, before them let out an unexpected hiss before turning to look away.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." Conrad said sincerely, then quietly continued, "But what can *I* do to help you?"

The beast snorted, then remarkably stood even taller, approaching ten feet in height as he chattered and hissed his response.

"You don't understand how things work on the outside. There really isn't any way I can stop these people. If I were to try to stop them by legal means, it would endanger your entire colony. And if I were to try and stop them by 'other' means... it would raise questions. It would draw interest."

"What's going on?"

"It sounds to me like a group of hunters must have found this place. It seems that even though the Wudewas can mask themselves from being *seen*, the hunters have technology to be able to target them with... I don't know, infra red, sonar, or something and use high power rifles to target them through the protective barrier. With the way this place is shaped like a basin, it *is* like shooting fish in a barrel. This is Ud-wra. Several of his people have been killed, including his wife and two of his children. Fortunately, the hunters haven't been able to gain entry to the valley and recover their trophies, otherwise there would be no hope of ever containing this."

"So these hunters don't *know* what they're hunting, do they?" Shawn asked cautiously.

"From the size and shape of their prey, they probably have an idea, but they have no proof."

"Have you heard any reports?"

"No. Nothing's reached me about it. They must be keeping it hush-hush until they can gather solid evidence."

"Then we need to make sure that they don't get any."

"It's not that easy. Conspiracy theories can spring out of nothing. Even if they only have blurry thermal scans, *some* people will believe them. If we make any move to try and stop them, they'll raise such hell that we'll never hear the end of it. If they were to meet with an unfortunate 'accident', I'm sure that they have some

sort of contingency plan in place to spread their evidence far and wide before we can contain it... we can't take the chance that they don't."

"We can't let them keep on killing these people."

"No. Of course not. I'm just not sure what we can do."

Agent Roberts' look became distant as he thought about possibilities.

"Have you thought of something?"

"Yes. But if we end up doing this, *you're* going to have to keep a few secrets to protect people that *I* care about."

Ud-wra made an abrupt grunt, drawing both men's attention.

"He wants to know what we're going to do."

Shawn took a moment to be certain within himself that he was doing the right thing before committing himself to an action. Finally, he quietly said, "If everything goes right, we're going to find the hunters and make them forget that they ever found the Wudewas."

Chapter 9

Although the grunts and growls of the Wudewas elder were loud and abrupt, as Shawn got used to hearing them, he began to get the sense of how gentle the enormous beast was.

"We need to go and try to find a way to deal with your attackers." Conrad said earnestly.

Shawn felt another chill run up his spine as the Wudewas looked at him appraisingly.

"This is Shawn. He's here to help me." Conrad said when he noticed.

A snorted grunt was Ud-wra's response.

"No, he and I aren't members of the cursed. I come on their behalf, since I am capable of speaking with you. Shawn is here representing himself, following his personal quest to right wrongs and aid those in need."

The Wudewas elder looked at Shawn again, this time with a far more gentle look in his eyes.

"Time is not our friend. We must go if we are to resolve this before more of your people are injured or killed." Conrad said seriously.

Ud-wra let out a gruff whispered growl, then withdrew.

Shawn and Conrad stood quietly for a moment, looking where the Wudewas elder had disappeared into the mist. Finally, Conrad broke the silence by asking, "Do you have my clothes?"

"Um, no. I kind of got distracted." Shawn shyly admitted.

"Will you help me find them? I need to get dressed so that we can go."

"Yeah." Shawn muttered distractedly, then squatted down to try and find Conrad's clothes in the mist at their feet.

"What are you?" Shawn asked as he felt around on the ground.

"I'm a human, just like you." Conrad said simply.

Shawn stopped gathering clothing for a moment as he looked at the bird... man... monster, dubiously.

"I'm a human who was cursed. As a result, I can shapeshift." Conrad said simply.

"And because of that, you were somehow able to learn the Wudewas language?" Shawn guessed as he stood.

"Hold this." Conrad said as he handed Shawn the clothing he had gathered.

Shawn took the clothes from him and sorted them as he waited.

Before his eyes, the bird creature transformed into a naked man, standing before him.

"In ancient times there was a great man... or maybe a god. I guess it doesn't matter. His name was Aengus MacOg. He was said to be able to transform himself at will into a black swan."

"Like you just did."

"Exactly. Because I share his transformative ability... I'm not sure if it creates a bond or if it makes me a suitable vessel, but for whatever reason, the form that I can take makes it possible for me to carry a sliver of Aengus MacOg's essence, giving me the ability to speak to all living creatures."

"So you can speak to... dogs and cats? Squirrels?" Shawn asked cautiously, then held out the clothes that he was holding so that Conrad could dress himself.

"I suppose so, although I can't imagine that they would have much to say. I've only had the ability since early this morning, so I can't really tell you how it works."

"I get that you can't or won't talk about certain things, but you said that you're under a curse, right?"

"Yes."

"Is the person who did this to you, who made you able to speak to the Wudewas, the same person who originally cursed you?"

"Yes."

"But from all appearances, you're doing this of your own free will. Was there a *reason* that you were cursed?"

"I was in the right place at the right time to help people in need." Conrad said, then squatted down to put on his shoes.

"If I were to have contact with the person who did this to you, would I be cursed too?"

"Probably not. While I suppose that it would be *possible* for her to curse you, she wouldn't do it without a good reason." Conrad explained, then stood as he asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"Lead the way."

* * * * *

Shawn was aware of the huge gray beast that was following them, mostly out of their sight.

He supposed that he couldn't blame the Wudewas for being suspicious of strangers in their home.

As soon as he and Conrad reached the barrier, Conrad led the way through and they emerged into late afternoon daylight.

"Should we do a little reconnaissance before we head back to the car?" Shawn asked cautiously.

"No. There's too great a chance that we'd be spotted and be killed or taken captive. We need to get back to the car as soon as we can. I know of a few people who can help us with reconnaissance when we come back."

"As soon as we're out in the open, I'm going to need to make a call. I don't know how much preparation time my people will need... if they'll even agree to do it at all." Shawn said seriously.

"We should go back up to that peak so you won't be limited by the mountains on either side."

"Good plan. Are you going to need to call anyone?"

"My people don't have phones, I'll have to go and ask them in person."

"Okay. Then I guess as soon as we get back to the office, I can do some research and see if the bureau has anything useful to let us know who these people might be." Shawn said thoughtfully, then thought to ask, "When are we looking at leaving Waxell to come back out here?"

"Let's try for seven in the morning. Will that give your friends enough time to make the trip?"

"I'll be sure to ask them... But calling them my *friends* might actually be pushing it a bit."

"I can't be sure who of my friends will agree to come along. They have their own lives and own commitments to worry about."

"Your friends, they're from the other colony, right? The cursed ones?"

"Yes. But I'd rather not get into too much detail about them. Everything I tell you has the potential to compromise their safety."

"But if it's something that I've already figured out for myself, then you're not really telling me anything. It's to your benefit if you

verify my assumptions so that you'll know that I'm not working with a faulty understanding of the situation that we're in."

"I suppose that's true."

"You said that you can change because of a curse, and you call the people of the other colony, 'The Cursed Ones'."

"Yes."

"But you've also said that you're human, but from the way you said it, I'm assuming that your friends are something else."

"Yes."

"Since they're cursed, does that mean that your friends shapeshift like you do?"

"Yes."

"Do they look human?"

"Yes. Except when they're transformed, of course."

"Of course." Shawn said with a smile.

"What about your friends? Do they look human?" Conrad asked curiously.

"Yes. Well, usually."

"Do they transform?"

"Yes. Although I suspect that I haven't seen all of what they can do."

"And they have some sort of ability to wipe out people's memories?"

"Yes. I've actually experienced that. It's very effective."

"If that's the case, why do you remember them now?"

"Because they *allowed* me to remember. Maybe they thought that it was worth the risk."

"So I guess that means that they trust you?"

"I think that they trust me to the same extent that you do."

"As much as is necessary to get the job done."

"Right. And I totally get that. It's just frustrating to know that there's information that might be important that's being withheld."

"We're all walking a tightrope. We'll both have to do our best to see that our friends don't regret trusting us."

"If the Wudewas didn't need our help, I would never have told you."

"Same here."

* * * * *

When they finally reached the jagged peak, Shawn found the number he needed in his cell phone, then dialed it on the sat phone.

"May I speak to Dr. Killian please?"

"Yes actually, it is. This is Agent Roberts from the FBI."

"Thank you. I'll hold."

"Dr. Killian, this is Agent Roberts from the FBI. I've run into a situation and I could really use your help."

"Sorry about that, I'm on a satellite phone, so there's some lag. Let me get right to the point. In the course of my duties, I've come across a group of people who live in seclusion, but are now in danger of being exposed to the outside world. We have yet to determine *who* has found them, but once we do, we're very limited in what we can do to stop them. I was hoping that you might ask Lane and Duran if maybe they could come down here to help me

deal with this." Agent Roberts said in a burst to minimize the effect of the satellite lag.

Agent Roberts got a strange look, then looked to Agent Fastbeck and asked, "What's the name of their colony?"

"I don't know if it's the official name, but I've heard it referred to as the South Seid Colony."

"Southseid." Agent Roberts said into the phone.

He waited for a moment for a response, then smiled in relief.

"Yes. Thank you. We're planning to leave from the Waxell FBI field office at seven in the morning. Just let me know when they should be arriving and I'll arrange to meet them."

After a moment to wait for the lag and Dr. Killian's response, Agent Roberts finally said, "Yeah. I'll hold."

Agent Roberts then put his hand over the mouthpiece and said, "He's going to talk to the guys and make sure that they're willing to do it. If so, he'll find out for me when I can expect them to arrive."

"Did he know where you were talking about?"

"Who knows? He's as good as you are about not revealing what he really knows. He had me undress for him so that he could examine my naked body and I never even suspected... wait, never mind."

"Don't stop now. You've caught my interest."

"Maybe later."

"Do you think that your friends will be able to make it here in time?"

"No problem. The drive shouldn't take more than five or six hours..." Agent Roberts was saying, then abruptly stopped as he said into the phone, "Yeah. I'm still here."

After a moment of waiting for the lag, then listening, Agent Roberts finally responded, "That sounds fantastic. Just have them call me at the office... give me a second. I don't know the number."

"Waxell 1409." Agent Fastbeck automatically supplied.

"The number is Waxell 1409... I'm not sure how you're supposed to dial that."

There was another long pause, then Agent Roberts said, "Good to know. I'll be expecting their call when they arrive."

"Thanks for helping me. I knew that you'd be able to see the parallels between these people and yours and sympathize with their situation."

"Yeah. You too. Goodbye." Agent Roberts said before disconnecting the call.

"So they'll be driving in tonight?"

"Yes. They'll probably be on the road in the next hour or so."

"Then I suppose that we'd better hurry and get back to the office. We still have a lot of research to do, trying to determine the identities of our alleged hunters."

"I think you mean that *I* have a lot of research to do. As I recall, you're going to be going someplace with no phones to ask for volunteers to help us."

"That's true. But I shouldn't have to spend a lot of time convincing them. By the time I'm back, hopefully you'll have some leads for me to help you follow up on."

"I got a lot of experience doing research before I was finally allowed to go out into the field. I should be able to come up with something."

"Do you miss it?

"The desk job? Not at all. As Agent Simmons said when I first met him, 'No one goes through all the training to end up behind a desk'."

"That's true. This is the part of the job that everyone thinks of when they say 'FBI Agent'."

"Not *exactly* this. I mean, tromping through the forest on a quest to save a colony of..."

"It's best if we stay in the habit of calling them Wudewas. It's more accurate."

"Okay. But do you know if there are other... creatures... wait, that sounds so rude..."

"Remember how you talked about them on the phone? Just call them people."

"Do you think that there are other 'people' like the Wudewas out there?"

"This is the second secret colony that I've personally encountered, so it wouldn't surprise me to find out that there are others."

"Is the other colony called Northseid?"

"No."

"You know, when your friends and my friends get together, it *might* actually make conversation a lot easier if we have an agreed upon name for each group."

"I suppose that it might be better to describe people by where they're from, rather than by what they *are*."

"Trust me, I *know* what it's like to be completely defined by someone else's label for you. I wouldn't ever want to do that to anyone I call a friend."

"How has it been for you in Waxell so far? Has anyone treated you badly?"

"No. Not at all." Agent Roberts quickly assured him, then cautiously added, "But you have to understand that I have a lifetime of conditioning associated with this. I've been hurt enough times that I'm incapable of completely letting my guard down and opening myself to the *possibility* of letting it happen again."

"The town where my friends are from is called Brynnhollow. Their people are most commonly referred to as 'Brynns'."

"That's a lot less creepy than I was expecting."

"What about your friends?"

"Well, the friends that I called for help are from Columbus, Ohio. But the *community* that they're from is called 'Shadeside'. They call themselves Shadesiders."

"I'm not sure if that sounds creepy or not. It sounds to me like something that's *trying* to be creepy, but really isn't."

"Do you think that there'll be any problem getting the Shadesiders and the Brynns together?"

"Not knowing your friends, I can't say for sure. But if they're all decent people, there shouldn't be any problem."

"Lane's a decent person. Duran... tries... usually. When he slips up, most people excuse his behavior because of his age."

"How old is he?"

"That's hard to say. I'm still unclear on how Shadesider aging works. But he looks like he's about sixteen... sometimes he acts like it too."

"Well, you said that he tries. I think that as long as people recognize that, there shouldn't be too much of a problem."

"What about the Brynns?"

"I'm going to have to ask around and see who's available and willing to help. I really don't know who'll end up going with us."

Agent Roberts slowly nodded his understanding as they continued to walk.

"By the way, make sure that you don't *ever* mention the Brynns when you're in Waxell."

"Do they know about them there?"

"There are a few people, like Tracy, who know a few of the Brynns by sight. Most of the rest have just heard the stories about them."

"What stories?"

"It's mostly your typical fairy tale stuff. Haunted woods, mysterious creatures..."

"Like the swan-thing you turned into?"

"It's called an Oskmey, and... yes. It's likely that at some point someone stumbled across one of the Brynns when they were transformed and that's what started the legend."

"From what I've picked up, my Shadesider friends have some sort of instinctive need to go out into the woods and 'run wild' every so often. Could it be something like that?"

"Probably. The Brynns have to transform themselves at certain intervals. That's part of the curse that they're under."

"Maybe, when this is all done, your people and my people can 'run wild' together for a while."

"We'll have to wait and see how things go, but that might turn out to be something that they'd all enjoy."

"I don't know about you, but I think it's about time to break out the flashlights. Between the mountains and this tree cover, I can barely see a thing."

"Yeah."

* * * * *

Very little was said as they finished their trek back to the car.

The ride back to Waxell was conducted mostly in silence as both men thought about what they needed to accomplish in the coming hours.

"I'll be back just as soon as I've gotten things arranged with my people. Will you still be here?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he unlocked the door to the office.

"I should be. I've got to wait for the guys to arrive."

"I'd better get going then." Agent Fastbeck said before leaving.

Agent Roberts went to his desk and signed onto his computer to begin the monumental task of trying to do research on something for which he had essentially *no* search criteria.

* * * * *

"Hello?"

"Lane? I thought you were going to call when you got here."

"I thought that too, but I couldn't get a signal."

"Oh, right."

"We stopped at a restaurant to use their phone but the waitress knew who you were and told us where to find you."

"Well, I'm glad that you're here. You made good time."

"From the way Rafe talked, you've got some kind of an emergency. What's up?"

"Hang on." Agent Roberts said before hurrying through the doorway into the office.

When he returned, he had an office chair with him. He moved it around the reception desk and said, "Go ahead and sit down. This could take a minute."

Lane and Duran took their seats, then waited expectantly.

"What we've got is a secret society that's been hidden away from the world for a few hundred years. Someone's found them and has started shooting at them through their barrier. A few of them have been killed."

"Sounds bad."

"Yeah. Agent Fastbeck and I have been to the colony and all I can tell you is that they really need our help. While I believe that they're capable of finding and eliminating the people who attacked them, I'm afraid that if they did that, they'd probably end up being exposed because of it. I was hoping that, with your help, we might be able to make the people who found them forget what they'd found."

"Before we do that, just how important is it for this colony to remain hidden? I mean, can't they find a way to *blend in* and operate on the outskirts of society? Even though it's not ideal, it might allow them to keep up with the times and progress along with the modern world."

"They're not human... or, they don't *look* human. There's no way that they could ever live among regular people." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"Stop dancing around it. Just what is it that we're talking about, here?" Duran asked impatiently.

"Okay. In simple terms, what we're talking about is a colony of Bigfoots. They've lived in isolation and seclusion all this time and never hurt anyone. Now some hunters or something have found them and have started taking pot-shots at them."

"A *colony* of *Bigfoots*?" Duran asked dubiously.

"What did you think I was going to say? Vampires?" Agent Roberts asked with a grin.

"So you want for us to find who's doing this to the Bigfoots... Bigfeet...?" Lane stammered to a halt.

"We call them Wudewas. I've been told that it's a more accurate description of them."

"So we're supposed to find who's been shooting at the Wudewas and stop them?" Lane asked cautiously.

"No. Actually, Agent Fastbeck is out right now recruiting some help with the 'finding'. I'm going to trust in him and his friends to handle that part. As soon as they've found whoever's been doing this, it will be up to us to determine how much they know, how much evidence they have accumulated and where they've stored it, and then to make them forget that they ever encountered the Wudewas."

"You're not asking for much." Duran said with a roll of his eyes.

"I'm open to other suggestions." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"How about we just kill them all?" Duran asked simply.

"We're considering that 'Plan B'." Agent Roberts said uneasily.

"Are we still planning on leaving first thing in the morning?"

"Yes. You guys can stay at my place tonight, if you'd like. I've got a spare room that you're welcome to."

"We had talked about getting a hotel room, but we didn't see any on the way into town." Lane said frankly.

"This isn't much of a tourist destination. The closest thing we have to a hotel is Mrs. Shumlin's Boarding House."

"Should I know what that is?"

"She rents out rooms in her home to strangers. If you're there at dinner time, she'll invite you to have dinner with her. Think about it as being like visiting your grandma's house for the weekend."

"It sounds horrible." Duran said with a cringe.

"I think we'd like to accept your invitation to use your spare room." Lane said with a grin.

"Good. If you guys are hungry, you can take a few minutes to go back to the diner. The food is excellent and Agent Fastbeck should be back before too much longer."

"We drove straight through, so we're pretty hungry. A meal sounds good." Lane said honestly, then looked at Duran with question.

Duran nodded his wholehearted agreement.

"What about you? Have you eaten?" Lane asked with concern.

"I haven't had time, but I can't leave this. I'm trying to compose a list of likely candidates of who might have attacked the Southseid colony."

"If you can tell us what you want, we can bring you something back."

"I would *love* a cheeseburger." Agent Roberts said immediately as he stood and took out his wallet.

"Don't worry about it, we can get it." Lane said as he also stood, then added, "Consider it payback for letting us stay at your house."

"Okay. Thanks, guys." Agent Roberts said as he put his wallet away, then sat behind his desk again.

* * * * *

"Mission accomplished." Agent Fastbeck said as he walked into the office.

"You just missed the guys. Lane and Duran went over to the diner to get something to eat." Agent Roberts said as he looked up from his work.

"I didn't expect them to be here so quickly."

"They drove straight through."

"Well, I've arranged for three, possibly four, people to help us."

"*Possibly* four?"

"Pending parental permission."

"You want to bring a child with us?"

"He's a young teenager. It might end up being a good experience for him to use his natural... or supernatural talents for something important." Agent Fastbeck said frankly, then asked, "So what have you come up with here?"

"Nothing concrete. I've narrowed the list of 'possibles' down to under twenty. I don't know how much help it will be, but at least with this information we should be able to track any of them down that we need to."

After standing over his shoulder and reading for a few seconds, Agent Fastbeck quietly said, "This is some good solid work. Any of these people would be likely candidates. Make sure that you download all their files onto the laptop so that we'll have the information with us if we should need it."

"Right... Where do you keep the laptop? I haven't come across it yet." Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"In the bathroom cabinet, under the sink."

"Why do you have it in there?"

"That was the only outlet that I could find that wasn't already dedicated to another purpose."

"Right."

"Shawn? Why didn't you tell us..." A voice trailed off from the doorway.

"Lane and Duran, I'd like to introduce my new boss, Agent Conrad Fastbeck." Agent Roberts said formally.

"I prefer to think of us as coworkers." Agent Fastbeck said in response, then looked to their guests and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"What the *hell* is up with you?" Lane asked as he put an arm out protectively and guided Duran toward the door behind him.

"What's wrong?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Every instinct I have is telling me that we don't want to be anywhere near him. He's dangerous." Lane said and seemed to be breathless in panic.

"I guess Shadesiders must be able to sense curses." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"Since they didn't react negatively to you, that seems possible." Agent Fastbeck said speculatively, then carefully added, "I can download those files. Why don't you knock off for the night and get some sleep? We'll meet back here at seven in the morning."

"Yeah. Call me if you need anything before then."

Agent Fastbeck nodded as he noticed that Lane and Duran had already left.

* * * * *

"Are you guys alright?"

"I don't know what that was. I've never felt anything like that." Lane said frankly.

"If it affects you that strongly, then tomorrow might be interesting."

"What were you saying about a curse?" Duran asked cautiously.

"It's not important right now. That food smells great, let's go back to the house and eat."

"I'm not going anywhere until you've told us what you've gotten us into." Lane said firmly.

"That food smells *really* good." Duran said urgently.

"I'm parked behind the office. Follow me out and we'll talk over dinner."

Lane seemed reluctant, but at Duran's pleading expression, he finally agreed.

* * * * *

"You FBI guys must make some pretty good money." Duran said as they got out of their cars.

"As Agent Fastbeck has said, the economics are a little different here."

"Yeah. I couldn't believe it when our three meals cost less than five dollars." Lane said as he followed Agent Roberts up to the front door.

Agent Roberts smiled as he opened the door, then stood aside to usher his guests inside.

"This place is awesome." Lane gasped as he walked into the living room.

"Yeah. I think so too." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"Guys? Remember the food?" Duran said urgently.

Shawn laughed, then said, "Why don't we have our dinner in the breakfast room? I think you'll appreciate the view."

"*Breakfast* room?" Lane asked dubiously.

Shawn smiled at him, then said, "This is just as amazing to me as it is to you. I'm glad that you're here so that I can share it with you."

"Less talk. More food." Duran said as he followed.

"We're almost there." Shawn assured him, then stood aside as he presented the little breakfast nook off the kitchen.

The room was surrounded on three sides with windows which afforded an eerie view of the untamed wilderness in the moonlight.

"Okay. Cool room." Lane said as he walked to the window and looked out.

"Yeah. Great." Duran said impatiently, then asked, "Food?"

Lane took the paper bag that he had been carrying to the small table and sat it down.

"Would you like for me to get you some plates?"

"I think we're okay. Come on. You've got to be hungry too." Lane said as he took his seat.

Agent Roberts was only too happy to comply.

* * * * *

"So, what can you tell me about your... friend, Agent Fastbeck?" Lane asked seriously.

"What I *can* tell you may not be the same as what I *know*. I just want to be upfront with you about that."

"Believe me, we know all about having to keep secrets." Lane said frankly.

Duran nodded his agreement, since his mouth was otherwise engaged.

"When I look at Agent Fastbeck, I don't get any kind of... vibe, or anything like that from him. I don't know what it is that you're feeling, but I don't feel it at all."

"I'm not imagining it." Lane said firmly.

"I wasn't implying that you were. I'm just saying that I don't feel it and you do. That seems to suggest that what you're sensing is

something that's unique to Shadesiders." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"Okay. Yeah. That sounds reasonable."

"I don't know everything about Agent Fastbeck, but I've already asked him flat out and he's told me that he's human... I mean, like me. The only difference between us is that he's been cursed."

"Wait... hold up... cursed?" Lane asked dubiously.

"Don't ask me how or why it happened because he hasn't told me. And although I've witnessed at least one example of how the curse manifests, I think that out of respect for him, that he should be the one to decide who he shares that with."

"But you've seen enough to confirm his story?" Lane asked cautiously.

"I don't know if I'd go that far, but I've witnessed something that I can't explain and he's provided an explanation for it." Agent Roberts said seriously, then continued, "The point I'm trying to make is that as far as I know, it's his curse that you're sensing. Your instincts might see it as being something dangerous to you or something that you're not equipped to deal with."

"This has to be the best hamburger that I've ever tasted." Duran said blissfully.

Lane looked at him uncertainly, then took a bite of his own burger.

That prompted Shawn to also start his meal.

"Well?" Duran asked impatiently.

Lane considered carefully as he chewed, then quietly said, "I will forgive your blasphemy against White Castle and admit that this is the 'second' best burger that I've ever tasted."

Chapter 10

Shawn startled awake at the sound of his alarm. He couldn't be sure if it were due to the fact that he had house guests or if it were more about their impending excursion.

The previous night he had made the unfortunate mistake of asking how Devin was doing. After that he was told, in great detail, about every miniscule achievement that Devin had made, no matter how inane.

To sum it up, they had been able to 'paper train' Devin... mostly. And Devin had apparently discovered masturbation. The combination of those two factors seemed to have made caring for the young werewolf quite a bit easier. Clean-up was simplified and most of the time Devin would see to his own entertainment, therefore he didn't require their *constant* attention.

When Shawn walked into the kitchen, he was surprised to find Duran at the stove, preparing breakfast.

"I hope you don't mind." Duran said over his shoulder.

"Not at all. Thank you for cooking." Shawn said sincerely.

"Duran's a great cook." Lane said from the kitchen table.

"Actually, I suck. But Lane is absolutely helpless in the kitchen, so it works out."

"I can sympathize." Shawn said with a grin at Lane.

"I couldn't find any coffee. Did I just miss it?"

"No. I forgot to buy any. We can pick some up at the Waxell Diner on the way to the office. When I have some free time, I'll have to remember to buy some coffee... and a coffee maker... and cups..."

"It sounds like it'll be easier to just stop at the diner." Lane said frankly.

"Yeah. That's part of why I don't already own a coffee maker."

"Sit down. It's almost ready." Duran said from his place at the stove.

"Thanks for doing this. I really appreciate it."

"We should be thanking you for letting us stay in your house." Duran said as he carried plates to the table.

"Yeah. I doubt that we would have been able to relax in that boarding house place." Lane added.

"Speaking of relaxing, are you guys going to be able to handle being around Agent Fastbeck and his cursed friends?"

"Now that I'm expecting it, I should be fine. It was just getting slapped with it out of nowhere that threw me off."

"How about you, Duran?"

"What? Do you think that just because I'm younger that I won't be able to handle it? Is that your problem?"

"No. I was just asking you the exact same question for the exact same reason that I asked Lane, you overly sensitive little prick."

Duran looked at Shawn with surprise for a moment, then broke into a grin before saying, "I thought that if I pushed hard enough I'd get you to be *real* with me."

"Is this some kind of game to you?"

"No. But if I can get you to be real with me, then I'll know that I can be real with you."

"You're not going to start telling me stories about your fucked up childhood and expecting me to hold you while you cry about it and stuff like that, are you?"

"No. I just mean that now I've seen what's hiding out under the politeness and formality. When I pushed you, you didn't attack me personally... or physically. You just called me on my bullshit. I

wanted to know what's cooking underneath before I go into a battle with you."

"So are you saying that you're not *actually* a bratty teenager?"

"Oh, I am. I wasn't play acting, I just wasn't bothering to hold myself back, either."

"Well, now that you've gotten *whatever* it was that you were looking for, I'd appreciate it if you would go ahead and put forth the effort. I don't have a lot of patience for the attitude."

"Okay. Yeah." Duran agreed, then thought to add, "And just so you know, my childhood wasn't fucked up. It was pretty good. And if I ever need a good cry, I've got Lane for that."

"That'll work."

The three enjoyed a few quiet minutes as they ate and each pondered their own thoughts.

The silence was finally broken by Shawn asking, "Do you guys mind that I called for your help?"

"You do what you've got to do. We understand that. I'd much rather help you do *something* than know that you stood back and did nothing when you could have helped someone who needed it." Lane said honestly.

"From what I understand, you guys help people all the time. It's what you do." Shawn said simply.

"The same goes for you, doesn't it? I mean, that's what your job is all about." Duran asked in return.

"That, and reports. Lots and lots of reports."

* * * * *

After a stop at the Waxell diner for coffee, Agent Roberts pulled around to his customary parking place behind the office.

"Where are your friends?" Agent Fastbeck asked as Agent Roberts walked into the office.

"Out in the car waiting for us to be ready. Where are yours?"

"They're going to meet up with us on the way out of town. They don't like to stop in Waxell any more than necessary."

"Is there anything that we need to discuss before we leave?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I've been thinking about it and as much as I want to protect everyone's secrets, you and I are the organizers of this entire event. I think for us to make well thought out decisions, we need to know as many of the facts as possible."

"Makes sense." Agent Roberts agreed.

"My friends... they're witches... *cursed* witches." Agent Fastbeck quietly admitted.

"Mine are vampires." Agent Roberts said simply.

Agent Fastbeck nodded for a moment, then said, "I guess that we'd better be going. We wouldn't want to keep our friends waiting."

"Yeah." Agent Roberts said as he picked up the laptop and a stack of maps from the desk.

* * * * *

Agent Fastbeck mentioned that it might be a good idea for Agent Roberts to get a CB radio installed in his car.

While both agents had walkie-talkies, Agent Fastbeck felt that it would be best if they rode together so that they could discuss their ideas and make plans for what was to come.

"Is there anything I need to know about your vampires before we find ourselves in a confrontation?"

"They call themselves Shadesiders. They're stronger, faster and more agile than regular people, so don't worry about them if they go up against someone who looks bigger and stronger than they are. I've seen them in a full-out fight. They can handle it."

"So they're not vulnerable to sunlight, crosses or any of the other things in the legends?"

"They're a little sensitive to sunlight, but I don't know everything about them. The only thing like that you really have to watch out for is not to get bitten by them. That part of the legend is true."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"What about the witches? Anything I should know?"

"The curse that they're under prevents the Brynns from using magical abilities, except for the animal transformations, and those are augmented to the point that they can't go for very long without transforming. That's also what prevents them from being around regular people."

"So, their curse isn't like the Shadesiders. I mean, they can't accidentally curse you, can they?"

"I'm still not entirely clear on how all of that works. As I understand it, the curse is typically passed from one spouse to the other and from the parents to the children."

"From the way Lane and Duran reacted to you, I doubt that intimate relationships is going to be a problem."

"You should also know that there are two people who are capable of bestowing different versions of the curse with little more than a touch."

"What are the chances that those two will be joining us today?"

"Pretty good, actually. I'm one of them." Agent Fastbeck reluctantly admitted.

"But you said that you're a human..."

"I am. It just so happens that the curse that was put on me allows me to bestow a curse. But I have to admit that I have no idea what my curse would do to a regular human. It was designed to work on witches."

"What do you think it would do to a Shadesider?"

"I didn't even know that they existed until today, so your guess is as good as mine."

"I'm thinking that it would probably be best if we didn't find out."

"I just wanted you to be aware in case it came up for some reason."

"Thanks for telling me." Agent Roberts said sincerely, then cautiously asked, "Am I in any danger from you?"

"No. The only way I can curse someone is if I decide that it's the right thing to do. I can't be compelled to curse someone against my will. It invalidates the curse."

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I mean, you transforming, there's no way I'd believe a word of it."

"I'm still coming to grips with living as a cursed being."

"You said that there were two of you who could bestow a curse. Will the other one be coming with us?"

"No. When I asked for volunteers, I asked that they include people who could track a scent. Andrea's transformed state is another swan, like mine."

"If that's the case, couldn't she have done the 'ancient spirit essence' thing like you did?"

"No. From my understanding of things, she might have been able to do a similar thing with the spiritual essence of Caer Ibormeith. But I was told that she couldn't possibly host the essence of Aengus MacOg."

"Whatever you say." Agent Roberts said slowly, then continued, "Did you have a chance to look over the files that I assembled?"

"Yes. That was some expert work. Any or all of them could potentially be involved."

"From what I've been able to gather about them, they're not very trusting of each other. It's unlikely that more than any two or three of them would work collectively. They're just too greedy to take the chance of having to split their loot too many ways."

"You're reading more into this than I am, but you're probably right. My money's on Dr. Mickel. Not only does he have a background in archaeology, but he's also known to be less than ethical in his business practices."

"He was at the top of my list, too. If I had time to go more in-depth on my research, his would be one of the first files that I would investigate."

"Hold that thought. This is them up ahead. This is the meeting place that we agreed on." Agent Fastbeck said as he pulled the car onto the shoulder.

"Why are we stopping?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I want to be sure that your Shadesiders will be able to work with my Brynns. If either group can't handle it for some reason, we need to know now."

"I'll go get Lane and Duran." Agent Roberts said before opening his door.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts motioned for Lane and Duran to get out of their car and join him.

"What's going on? Why did we stop?"

"After your reaction to Agent Fastbeck last night, we just wanted to be sure that you'll be able to work with the Brynns before we start depending on you too much."

"That's kind of rude..."

"It makes sense." Lane interrupted.

Duran looked at him curiously.

"They need to know what to expect. It's smart to test it out before we drive all the way there." Lane explained.

Agent Roberts led the way to where Agent Fastbeck was talking to another group of people.

* * * * *

"Lowell, Olive, Jazz and Cain, may I present Agent Roberts, Lane and Duran."

"They don't smell right." Olive said cautiously and seemed to be readying herself for a fight.

"That's not quite the 'Pleased to meet you' that I was expecting." Duran said frankly.

"They *smell* like Bacchae." Lowell said cautiously.

"What we need to know right now is if you can work together. If you can't, we'll have to come up with a work-around or something." Agent Fastbeck said firmly, trying to get everyone back on topic.

"They feel like danger, like something bad about to happen." Duran said frankly.

"But can you work with them?" Agent Roberts pressed.

"Yeah. We can do it." Duran said mostly confidently.

"What about you, Lowell? Do you think that you'll be able to work with the Shadesiders?"

"It smells to me like their meat's been tainted. As long as it doesn't involve me having to bite one of them, there shouldn't be a problem." Lowell said carefully, not turning his gaze away from the two Shadesiders for an instant.

"Yeah. We'd really rather that you didn't bite us, if it's all the same to you." Duran said frankly.

Lane then quickly added, "And we don't feel like biting you either."

Olive chuckled at the very idea.

Duran was somewhat offended by her dismissive attitude and let his fangs drop and his other more vampiric features become more prominent as he snarled at her.

"You *are* Bacchae! I knew it!" Lowell said with satisfaction.

"If we're all agreed that we can work together, let's continue on. We're going to need all of your help if we're going to resolve this situation." Agent Fastbeck said firmly, drawing all attention back to him.

Agent Roberts was the first to move, but soon everyone returned to their vehicles.

As Agent Fastbeck pulled back onto the road to lead the way, Agent Roberts quietly said, "I think that went well."

* * * * *

The drive was mostly quiet as Agent Roberts studied the files of the potential perpetrators.

He focused the majority of his attention on Dr. Edward Mickel, Professor of Archaeology. According to the publicly available records and social media accounts, Dr. Mickel had taken a semester off to do research in the field, and the entire project was shrouded in secrecy.

Looking into Dr. Mickel's history unveiled an incident in Argentina that very nearly resulted in his incarceration. Undoubtedly, a large

sum of money must have changed hands to get him out of that situation.

"The more I look at this, the more I think that Mickel is the only one who could pull this off. None of the rest have the financial resources to take on a project of this scale."

"I got that impression, too." Agent Fastbeck said thoughtfully, then added, "Although it wouldn't surprise me to find out that Sylvia Richter or Corbin Spieth were working with him. They both have the academic background to be of use to him and neither appear to be otherwise engaged in anything at the moment. There are also accounts of both of them working with him before."

"So, what's the actual plan when we get there?"

"Travel to the Wudewas compound, then set the Brynns on the scent of whoever attacked them. Once they've located their base camp, bring the Shadesiders in to gather intelligence."

"What if they're not there?"

"Then we'll gather as much information as we can and discuss options for a stakeout or an ambush."

"If this is going to drag out for days, we're going to need supplies."

"Let's just see how things go before we worry too much about that. If we have to make a run for supplies, we will."

"Why do I have the feeling that I'm going to be the one stuck with that duty?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I'm the only normal human. I don't have any special ability to contribute to the search."

"You have FBI training and background information about who we're likely to be facing. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you don't have a place in this operation. Without you, we wouldn't have

any option but to eliminate the people who have been attacking the Wudewas."

"Speaking of that, how is the Wudewas that went for help? Is he going to be ready to return soon?"

"I checked on him last night. Although he's anxious to return to his people, I think it will be a few days before he's physically able. When he's ready, we'll see to it that he's transported the majority of the way so that he can return without driving himself to exhaustion again."

"I hesitate to mention this, but have you noticed that our companions are all predators?"

"I hadn't thought about it in those terms, but I suppose that you're right."

"Does that mean that we're prey?"

"No. We're part of their pack. On the other hand, we could conceivably end up having to protect Dr. Mickel and his companions."

"I suppose we'll do what we have to."

* * * * *

"Well, I guess we won't have to worry about setting up a stakeout." Agent Roberts said as he looked at the vans parked at the bend in the road.

"Get their plate numbers. I'm going to pull further down the road. Once we've stopped, you can use the sat phone to establish a hot spot and run those plates."

"I'm on it. If you'll get the others ready, I should have some answers for you by the time you're finished." Agent Roberts said as he quickly snapped pictures as they slowly drove by.

Once Agent Fastbeck was sure that Agent Roberts had all the pictures that he needed, he continued on down the road until he

found a reasonable layby that could accommodate all their vehicles.

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As soon as they were stopped, Agent Roberts went to work on establishing computer contact with the bureau. The connection was tenuous at best, but he was able to run the plates and confirm that the vehicles were, in fact, registered to a company owned by Dr. Edward Mickel.

It didn't take much investigation to prove that the company was a false front, created for tax purposes and as a buffer so that Dr. Mickel would be one step removed from liability in the event of unfortunate returns on his investments.

"Was it Mickel?" Agent Fastbeck asked as Agent Roberts approached.

"Yes. And I was able to confirm that Corby Spieth is also involved." Agent Roberts said slowly, noticing that all the 'Brynns' seemed to be undressing.

"Good. Our tracking team are going to investigate the vehicles and see if they can pick up the scent." Agent Fastbeck said seriously, then asked, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah. The laptop's locked in the trunk. Here are your keys." Agent Roberts said slowly as he handed them over without looking.

"It's usually best if they undress before they transform." Agent Fastbeck explained.

Before Shawn could respond, the entire group of them transformed from their human appearances into those of various types of canines.

He could detect a dog and a wolf in the mix, but the other two weren't immediately identifiable to him.

"Be careful. We need information, not casualties." Agent Fastbeck said firmly.

The wolf yipped once, then the 'pack' turned as one and hurried up the road, to where Dr. Mickel's vehicles were parked.

"You guys don't need us for anything, do you?" Duran asked anxiously as he watched the animals go.

"No. All we're doing now is waiting to see what the Brynns come up with." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

"They're not the only ones who can track a scent." Duran said simply.

"If there's no point to us staying here, we'd really like to go too." Lane said honestly.

"Just remember what our objectives are. No killing." Agent Fastbeck said firmly.

"God! You sound *just* like my dad!" Duran huffed.

Lane grinned at his reaction, then said to Agent Fastbeck, "We won't do anything but what we came here to do. I promise."

"Thank you." Agent Fastbeck said sincerely.

Taking that as his approval, Lane and Duran took off running at something beyond a normal 'human' pace.

"We should probably hurry." Agent Roberts said as he started to walk in that direction.

"No. I think it's better if we follow along at a deliberate pace and do a thorough investigation. Remember that what we bring to the table is our training and experience. Let's be sure to put it to good use."

Although Shawn wanted to hurry along behind the others to see whatever excitement there might be, he couldn't disagree with

Agent Fastbeck's assessment of their situation and their contribution to the overall project.

* * * * *

After what seemed to be an unreasonable amount of time inspecting and taking pictures of parked vehicles, Agents Fastbeck and Roberts finally started their trek into the wilderness.

"So, our objective isn't to catch up to the others, but to reach the Southseid colony, right?" Agent Roberts finally asked.

"Only inasmuch as we don't have a clue about where our companions have gone. It seems reasonable to assume that Dr. Mickel would set up his base camp somewhere near the colony. If we're in close proximity, I think we'll have a better chance of someone from our group finding us."

"Given their abilities, I doubt that any of them will have a problem finding us if they want to." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"True enough." Agent Fastbeck easily agreed, then smiled as he said, "Lowell was telling me that he wanted to bring Cain along so that they could track and hunt together. It's a chance for him to share this part of his life with his great-grandson."

"I didn't understand why you agreed to bring a child with you when it might be dangerous, but now I see. Not only is it a rare opportunity for them, but the danger is what makes it real and important."

"I have no doubt that Lowell will keep a careful eye on Cain to be sure that he doesn't take on more than he can handle. But I think most of what he's hoping to do is share what he's learned over his life and provide an opportunity for one of his great-grandsons to make him proud."

"Just as long as they're careful. We already know that Dr. Mickel is armed."

"Yes. And we also know that he has some method of seeing through the Wudewas barrier. Depending on what he's using, it's possible that the same technology could be turned on us to track us down and shoot us."

"Are you still thinking it's infrared?"

"That or some other form of night vision, maybe."

Both men stopped in their tracks when an odd looking stripey dog ran up to them.

Before either man could react, the dog-like creature began to transform.

"We found them. Grandpa told me to come back and get you and show you where they are." Cain said in his half-human, half-canine form.

"Is everyone alright? Did the people at the camp see you?"

"Everyone's fine. They didn't see us at all. But those guys that you brought with you showed up right after we did and they said that they're going to do something. Grandpa told me to go and get you before they did whatever it was." Cain quickly explained.

"Lead the way." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

Cain transformed back to his fully animal form, then started back in the direction he had come from.

* * * * *

The hurried walk through the forest wasn't like it had been before. This time they had someone leading the way, so there wasn't the same sense that every step might lead them into some dire situation.

"Please, be quiet and stay here." A voice said from ahead of them, before Lowell stepped out into the clearing.

The only adequate term that might apply to his form was 'werewolf'.

"The boys that you brought with us asked for us to keep you away for a bit while they work." Lowell said slowly, obviously not happy with the request.

"Is the enemy neutralized?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"Those boys didn't do anything at first but stand and stare. But after a few minutes they started to glow, then everyone in the camp started sleepwalking toward them... damndest thing I've ever seen."

"How far away are we from their camp?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"'Bout a quarter of a mile, at most. Not far."

"I don't know how long it will take for Lane and Duran to do their work, but there's no point in us standing around waiting for them."

"What should we do instead?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Let's go let Ud-wra know that his people are safe."

"What about them?" Agent Roberts asked, glancing at the great-grandfather and great-grandson standing side-by-side, both half-transformed.

"The Wudewas know about the Cursed Ones and sent someone to ask them for help. I don't think they'll have a problem with actually getting to meet them in person." Agent Fastbeck said thoughtfully, then turned to Lowell and Cain and asked, "Is that okay with you guys?"

"I don't understand." Cain said honestly.

"It's something new for us to discover. We'll experience it together." Lowell assured him.

"It's over this way." Agent Fastbeck said as he started to lead the way.

Agent Roberts let Lowell and his great-grandson pass before taking up the rear and guarding their backs.

* * * * *

"Shawn, would you mind taking care of my clothes?" Agent Fastbeck asked as they stopped at the barrier of ivy and weeds.

"I don't mind, now that I know what you're asking me to do." Agent Roberts finished with a smile.

Agent Fastbeck began to undress, and as he did, he handed each article of clothing to Agent Roberts so that he could keep it all sorted for him.

"When we go in, just let me do all the talking. Ud-wra won't be able to understand what you're saying. I'm able to speak with him due to some magical thing that Ima did to me." Agent Fastbeck said toward Lowell and Cain.

"We'll just watch." Lowell assured Agent Fastbeck solemnly.

After taking off the last of his clothes, Agent Fastbeck began his transformation and became the black Oskmey.

"*In the bond of blood, in the bond of pain, in the bond of shared grief, in the name of Cernunnos who oversees and protects, accept the guardians of light into your sanctuary.*"

As the vines and weeds seemed to part under Agent Fastbeck's touch, Agent Roberts motioned for Lowell and Cain to precede him through the barrier.

He noticed that the half-transformed great-grandfather and great-grandson joined clawed hands and walked into the unknown misty darkness together.

Agent Roberts followed as he made sure to keep careful hold of Agent Fastbeck's clothing for him.

* * * * *

Agent Fastbeck led their way through the misty darkness until an enormous form appeared before them.

"Please tell Ud-wra that we have found those who have caused your people harm." Agent Fastbeck said firmly.

The huge beastly figure growled once, then began to move away.

"He wants us to follow." Agent Fastbeck said quietly.

Agent Roberts was surprised. He had expected to be told to wait until Ud-wra was summoned.

The large creature seemed to disappear from before them, then Agent Roberts watched carefully as Agent Fastbeck turned to the left and stepped through a gap in the trees.

Lowell and Cain went through next as Agent Roberts followed closely behind.

* * * * *

It was difficult to walk down the gnarled roots and outcroppings of rock that served almost as stair steps or ladder rungs.

More than once, Agent Roberts nearly lost his balance, but thanks to the hiking gear that he had recently acquired, he was able to find reliable enough purchase to continue climbing down.

* * * * *

After descending a significant distance, they finally came to an archway of tangled ivy and branches that seemed to be filled with light.

Walking through the archway was like stepping into another world.

The mysterious gray furred creature took on new features in the bright light of day. He was still enormous and covered in fur, but his features now appeared to be decidedly more human.

Agent Roberts was finally able to tear his gaze away from their guide and look around the primitive village where they found themselves.

There were several Wudewas out and about, attending to their daily chores. All of them stopped whatever they were doing and stared disbelievingly as the Oskmey, Werewolf, Agdlak and one lone human followed their guide to the largest of the huts, in the center of the village.

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The large Wudewas took one step into the doorway, then made an ominous growl, announcing his presence.

There was a growl from inside in response, then their guide motioned for his guests to proceed into the hut.

When Agent Roberts eyes adjusted to the dimmer light inside, he saw Ud-wra standing before them, staring back.

"Elder Ud-wra, I come with news. We have assembled a team of people to track down those who have hurt you. As we speak, my companions have your attackers in custody and are attempting to find out just how much they know about you."

Ud-wra snorted and growled a long response.

"We were told that they had been taken, but I haven't talked to them myself. As soon as I found out, I came to tell you that your people were no longer in danger."

Ud-wra growled again.

"If you would like, I can go now and return with that information."

There was another growl, and to Agent Roberts, it seemed to be a bit more impatient.

"As you wish. If you have nothing else that needs to be done first, we will go now."

Ud-wra growled once, then Agent Fastbeck turned to leave.

* * * * *

As soon as they were outside the hut, Agent Roberts quietly asked, "What's going on?"

"Ud-wra is going with us."

Chapter 11

"Ud-wra is going with us... outside? To the base camp?" Agent Roberts asked in astonishment.

"Well, he's going to follow in the shadows. It goes against his instincts to walk in the open with us." Agent Fastbeck explained.

"So he'll meet us there?"

"Yes. He wants to see the people who killed his family and understand how they were able to breach the barrier." Agent Fastbeck said as they followed their guide back across the village compound to the archway.

They walked in silence for a moment until Cain quietly asked, "They're not transformed, are they? Is this what they really are?"

"That's right. These are the Wudewas. This is what they are and how they live." Agent Fastbeck quietly explained.

"It's just like we're Brynns and those others are Bacchae and this young man traveling with us is a regular human, we all have our differences, but we also have things in common." Lowell quietly explained.

"Did you know about the Wudewas?" Agent Roberts asked Lowell curiously.

"I had heard stories, of course, but you never know how much of that is true and how much of it is from too much alcohol and too little companionship." Lowell finished with a chuckle.

Agent Roberts smiled and nodded since, not too long ago, he wouldn't have believed it either.

There was little opportunity for talk as they began the long climb upward, to the lip of the basin which contained The South Seid.

* * * * *

"Thanks for carrying my clothes, Shawn. I really appreciate it." Agent Fastbeck said as soon as they were outside the barrier.

"It was no problem. In fact, with everything we just saw, I kinda forgot that I was carrying them." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"We don't need to wait. Ud-wra will follow in his own way and reveal himself when he's ready." Agent Fastbeck said as he dressed.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to scout ahead while Cain shows you the way." Lowell said cautiously.

"Do you think there's a problem?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"I think it would be shortsighted of us to assume that there isn't." Lowell said frankly.

"Good point. We'll see you when we get there."

Agent Roberts watched in fascination as Lowell transformed from his werewolf form into that of a complete wolf.

"Right, then. We should be on our way, too." Agent Fastbeck said as he finished dressing.

"It's this way." Cain said as he started walking in the direction that Lowell had gone.

Agent Roberts was curious about the half-transformed boy. He was interested to know how it was for him growing up, knowing that he was something other than human.

By all appearances, Cain seemed to be not only perfectly happy with his lot in life, but he also seemed to be thriving, doing his best to be worthy of the trust the adults in his life had placed in him.

* * * * *

After making their way through a heavily forested area, Agent Fastbeck cautiously asked, "How much farther?"

"A little bit. We're going the longer way but it should be a lot easier on you." Cain said frankly.

"You're a really good guide. Thank you for taking such good care of us." Agent Roberts said to the boy, wanting it to be known that his diligence was appreciated.

"I've got to take good care of Agent Fastbeck so that someday he'll finally get around to asking my mom to marry him." Cain said simply.

The shocked look on Agent Fastbeck's face made Shawn break into laughter.

Cain stopped and rolled his eyes, then said, "Come on, you're always making excuses to be at her house and do things with her... I mean, it's okay. Deimos and I like you and Dad says that you and Mom are good for each other."

"Really? Ares said that?" Agent Fastbeck asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. We're all just waiting for you two to figure it out." Cain said simply, then started walking again.

Agent Roberts smiled at Agent Fastbeck's disbelieving expression.

* * * * *

"How's it going?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he arrived in the clearing where Olive, Jazz and Lowell were waiting.

"They're talking." Jazz said simply.

"...and talking and talking..." Olive moaned.

"It *is* their job to gather intelligence for us." Agent Fastbeck said quietly.

"I'm going to go and check on them." Agent Roberts said decisively.

"They don't want us distracting them." Jazz warned him.

"I'm pretty sure that I'll be less of a distraction to them than the rest of you. I've seen them at work before so I know how to approach them when they're concentrating."

"Go ahead. We'll wait here." Agent Fastbeck said decisively.

Agent Roberts gave a single nod, then thought to ask, "Where are they?"

"Over that way, you can't miss them." Olive said as she pointed.

Shawn gave another nod, then quietly slipped away.

* * * * *

"How's it going, guys?" Agent Roberts asked quietly when he caught sight of Lane and Duran.

"Hold on." Lane said in a tightly controlled voice as he quickly typed on his phone with his thumbs.

Agent Roberts was still and silent as he waited for Lane to tell him that it was okay to speak.

When Lane finally looked up, he said, "I think I've got everything here that you're going to need. But you'll probably want to look it over before we let them loose."

"So, you're done?" Agent Roberts asked with surprise.

"Probably not. But you and Agent Fastbeck will need to look over what we've done so far and see what else you need."

"What about them? Is it okay to leave them like that for a while?"

"Read this, then ask me." Lane said as he handed his phone to Agent Roberts.

"Okay. I'm going to take this back to Agent Fastbeck and I'll come back as soon as we've read it."

"We'll keep these guys quiet until you've decided what we're going to do." Lane said simply.

* * * * *

As much as Agent Roberts wanted to read what Lane had written, he felt that it was best for him to let Agent Fastbeck see it first, since whatever was going to happen next would be his ultimate decision.

Shawn was once again grateful that he had invested in hiking gear as he made his way through the trees and underbrush.

"How's it going?" Agent Fastbeck asked professionally.

"They've finished with their first interview, they wanted for me to give you this so you can decide what we're doing next." Agent Roberts said as he handed the phone to Agent Fastbeck.

"What are they doing?" Olive asked irritably.

"Right now they're just waiting for us." Agent Roberts said simply.

"I mean, what are they doing to them? How did they make them talk?"

"I don't know how it all works, but they have the ability to command and control people."

"That's creepy. I wonder if that would work on us."

"I have no idea."

"Did you read this?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he continued to read.

"No. I thought that since you're making the decisions, that you should read it first."

"These people are monsters."

"What do you want us to do with them?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Read this while I'm thinking about it." Agent Fastbeck said as he handed the phone back to Agent Roberts.

As Shawn started reading he was surprised by what was revealed. Dr. Mickel and his faithful assistants, Silkie and Corby had discovered ancient ruins in Peru and enslaved the indigenous population to unearth artifacts for them.

While it was happening, they lived like kings in luxury while their slave laborers were literally worked to death. Men, women and children were routinely beaten and killed to help 'motivate' the others to keep working.

When the last artifacts had been unearthed and nothing of value was left to steal, they gunned down the last of them, then set their village on fire. Dr. Mickel and his companions felt no remorse and would occasionally look back on it and laugh about 'the good old days'.

In regard to their current project, they didn't have any idea of who or what the Wudewas were. They thought that they had found yet another ancient site to loot and exploit. It was their plan to terrorize the indigenous population with the use of armed drones to locate and exterminate individuals from the air.

They had brought chainsaws and other equipment to help them breach the protective barrier so that they could move on to the next phase of their plan.

"Something's moving over there." Jazz said suddenly as he turned.

"That's probably Ud-wra." Agent Fastbeck told him, then turned to Agent Roberts and said, "Go back to the Shadesiders and prepare them. I'll explain what we've found and bring Ud-wra in a few minutes."

"Okay." Agent Roberts said distractedly as he finally tore his gaze away from the phone.

* * * * *

"What did he say?" Lane asked as Agent Roberts approached.

"He hasn't made a decision yet. He told me to come over here and prepare you. The leader of the Wudewas wants to see the people who attacked his village."

"So what you're really saying is that you don't want us to freak out when we see a Bigfoot, right?" Lane asked cautiously.

"Yes. Especially if that means that you'll lose your hold on our... archeologists." Agent Roberts said as he looked at the people with disgust.

"Yeah. Good call. We'll brace ourselves." Lane said seriously.

"Maybe we should just zonk them before he gets here." Duran quietly suggested.

"No. We need them awake in case someone wants to ask them a question." Lane said thoughtfully.

Agent Roberts nodded his agreement, then noticed that Lane and Duran turned in unison at a sound.

It took a few seconds before Agent Roberts could hear anyone approaching.

When Agent Fastbeck stepped into the clearing, he quietly said, "These two young men helped us collect the information. These five are the ones who attacked your people."

Ud-wra walked to the people who were sitting on the ground, staring vacantly.

After a long moment, Ud-wra let loose a low growl, then pointed at the two men seated farther back than the others.

"Are those two the hired help?" Agent Fastbeck asked Lane and Duran, who were staring dumbly at the Wudewas elder before them.

"Yeah." Lane finally said, then continued, "They're not blameless in all of this. They know enough about what Dr. Mickel is doing to

know that it's wrong. But compared to the other three, they're mostly harmless. They're really just in it for a paycheck."

Agent Fastbeck turned to Ud-wra and said, "These men are followers, not leaders. The leader that they chose to follow is the one most responsible for hurting your people."

Ud-wra grunted, then motioned to the next two.

"These are others of his followers, but they knew exactly what they were doing. They were fully aware of the consequences of their actions and chose to continue so that they could reap the rewards."

There was a slow, lingering growl as Ud-wra focused on Dr. Mickel.

"Yes. Although each person here bears responsibility for their own actions, this is the man who made the plan, paid the money and gathered the people to come here to try to rob and enslave your people."

A snort of disgust was Ud-wra's reply to that and Agent Roberts decided that he agreed with the sentiment.

"Lane and Duran can make these people forget that they ever found your home. But I'm afraid that there's nothing we can do to give you justice or in any way undo what has been done."

Ud-wra quietly growled his response, then turned and walked away, virtually fading into the forest around them.

"What did he say?" Lane asked in a whisper.

"He asked that you do your best to see that they don't hurt anyone else." Agent Fastbeck said quietly.

"That's kind of a tall order. They don't believe that ordinary rules, laws and ethics apply to them. There is no right or wrong with them, all they see is what they want and how to get it." Lane said grimly.

"We can do a lot of amazing things, but we can't give a conscience to someone who doesn't have one to begin with." Duran added.

"From what I read, they've done more than enough things to get them arrested and sent away for the rest of their natural lives. Maybe rather than trying to make them feel guilty, we should just settle on fulfilling Ud-wra's wishes and do our best to keep them from hurting any more people." Agent Roberts suggested.

"Can you do that?" Agent Fastbeck asked Lane and Duran.

"Do what?" Duran asked cautiously.

"Can you make them forget everything about the Wudewas, destroy any collected evidence, and then confess about everything else that they've done?"

"Yeah. It might take a little detail work to be sure that they'll do what we expect, but we should be able to manage it."

"In your notes, you said that no one outside these five were aware of what they were doing. How sure are you about that?"

"I'm as sure as they are." Duran said simply.

Lane grinned in his direction, then explained, "It's impossible for them to lie to us while they're under the thrall. Everyone who knows anything about this expedition is present. They don't trust each other enough to allow anyone to stay behind who could sell them out."

"Good. What about the evidence? How sure are you that you've accounted for all of it."

"If they know about it, we know about it." Lane assured him.

"Yeah. And when you look at it, they really don't have much of anything. When Dr. Mickel spotted the secluded valley, he recognized it as being a good place for primitives to settle. When he couldn't find an easy way in on foot, he broke out the drones." Duran said frankly.

"As soon as they found signs that there were primitive people living there, the plan was hatched to relive 'the good old days' and strip

this place of every natural and cultural resource before burning the whole thing down." Lane continued.

"Still, we need to be sure that every last bit of the evidence is destroyed... that should probably go for the equipment too... especially the drones."

"Already on it." Duran said simply.

Agent Fastbeck turned to Agent Roberts and quietly asked, "How can we *really* be sure that they're going to do everything that they're told to?"

"As far as I can tell, our only other choice would be to follow them home and keep them under constant surveillance."

Agent Fastbeck slowly nodded as he thought about what else they might be able to do.

"Just to recap, they're going to forget everything about finding this place and ever coming here, they'll destroy all the evidence, destroy their equipment, especially the drones, and then turn themselves in to the authorities and confess to every crime they've ever committed that's more serious than a parking violation. Did you want something more than that?" Lane asked seriously.

"Can you give them horrific nightmares about the things that they've done to haunt them for the rest of their lives?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"Sorry, these guys feel no regret, guilt or shame for anything. Beauty, horror, it's all the same to them." Duran said simply.

"How about you guys? Do you need anything?" Agent Roberts asked Lane and Duran.

"Some peace and quiet might be nice." Lane cautiously ventured.

"You got it. Just let us know when you're done." Agent Roberts assured him.

"Give us about half an hour. I think we should be done with all the detail work by then." Lane said thoughtfully.

"Thanks guys." Agent Roberts said before walking away with Agent Fastbeck at his side.

* * * * *

After Agent Roberts finished relaying the events to the Brynns in the clearing, Olive quietly asked, "Is there any reason for us to stay here then?"

"Not a practical one, but I'd feel like we were being rude if we left before the job was finished." Agent Fastbeck said seriously.

"Take it from one who knows, you need to enjoy the quiet times when you can get them." Lowell said as he rested against a tree.

Cain was sitting against the same tree, exactly copying his great-grandfather's position.

"So, Agent Roberts, how did you get yourself tangled up with the Bacchae, anyway?" Lowell asked curiously.

"I can't really talk about that. But they turned out to be pretty good guys." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"From all that I've heard over the years, Bacchae should be avoided at all costs. It's been said that they have no dignity, honor or sympathy for others."

"I've heard that too. I guess the way it works is that when someone is bitten by them, if they aren't killed, they change. Sometimes they change to be like Lane and Duran, good guys. Other times they turn out to be like you said, murderous monsters who kill for the pleasure of it."

"Then I suppose it's best if we don't automatically assume that if someone is a Bacchae that they're going to be willing to work with us."

"Probably not. I really don't know a lot about how it all works. The only thing I can say for sure is that there *are* good vampires... or Shadesiders. The ones who turn out bad are called Darksiders."

"Do these Shadesiders keep themselves hidden away, like the Brynn do?" Lowell asked curiously.

"Yes, but not in the same way. Some have found ways to live among normal humans and hide their differences. But I get the feeling that most of them stay separate, living on the outskirts of the human communities."

"I suppose that we might be able to do that as well, if we were willing to go to all the bother. It just seems simpler to stay entirely to ourselves."

"I have a feeling that the Wudewas agree with you." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"Speaking of that, we didn't get to see the woodwass or whatever when it was here. Are we going to get a chance to see one before we leave?" Olive asked hopefully.

"No. I'm afraid that won't be possible. Not only do the Wudewas want to remain secluded in their valley, but they're also grieving for the loss of some of their loved ones. There's no way I would want to take a group of tourists through their village, like we were visiting a zoo." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"It just seems a shame to come all this way for so little excitement."

"Excitement isn't all it's cracked up to be." Lowell said sagely, then continued, "We were asked to use our abilities to give aid when it was needed and we answered the call. We've kept the pact we made with the Wudewas centuries ago. Try to be content knowing that you behaved honorably and made your community proud."

"I was wondering, do you happen to know how the Wudewas and the Brynns ended up both settling here and making their pact?" Agent Fastbeck asked curiously.

"I don't think that there's a person alive today who knows the whole story. I've heard things over the years, but I don't know how true they are."

"What kinds of things?"

"Well, from what I made of it, I don't think that the Brynns and the Wudewas came here together so much as they were *sent* here, for their own protection. The pact that was made... I don't know if it was made by us. It's possible that once we were established and ready to stand on our own, that we were told to watch out for each other." Lowell said carefully.

"Who do you think did that?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"I can think of a mutual acquaintance of ours who might be in a position to do such a thing, even today. I don't mean him, of course, but one of his predecessors might have made the arrangements for both communities." Lowell said carefully.

"You're talking in riddles." Agent Roberts interjected.

"There's no way of knowing how many other colonies might be out there, with how many different types of people." Agent Fastbeck said speculatively.

"Do you think the people who arranged all of this are the same people who got us assigned here?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"No. I think it's more likely that they pull the strings of the people who assigned us here."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"I know. I don't want to believe that I'm being controlled, following someone else's plans for me, but look at where we are and what we're doing."

* * * * *

"We're done." Lane said as he and Duran walked into the clearing.

"Let's go." Olive said immediately.

"We smell bad to you, I get that." Duran said simply, then paused for a moment to reign in his frustration before continuing, "Your *aura* or energy or whatever is like a cheese grater on my last nerve. We're just as anxious to be done with this as you are."

"Kids! Play nice!" Lowell said with a mischievous grin.

Duran was able to hold himself back from responding disrespectfully, but instead turned to Agent Fastbeck and said, "We did what we came here to do. What now?"

"First, I'd like to thank you Duran. It's thanks to you and Lane that we didn't have to kill Dr. Mickel and his associates."

"Probably would have been a public service if we had." Duran muttered.

"Anyway. Now that our job is done, I just want for all of us to be perfectly clear about something. As far as the FBI will ever know, this incident did not happen. Agent Roberts and I are the only mundane humans present and we're sworn to secrecy. We're asking the rest of you to do the same. Just keep it quiet about what went on here and let the memory of it fade away naturally." Agent Fastbeck urged all those in attendance.

"Actually, if memories are a problem, Lane and I can do something about that." Duran said cautiously.

"No." Olive said firmly.

"Just sayin." Duran said as he held up his hands in a motion of surrender.

"I don't think there's any need for that, Duran, but thank you for the kind offer." Agent Fastbeck said politely, then more to the entire group he continued, "Just don't spread it around. Every person who

knows about the Wudewas makes it that much more likely that they'll be discovered and probably wiped out."

"While we've got everyone here, I wanted to ask something." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"What was that?"

"Can anyone think of any way that we can improve the Wudewas defenses? I mean, Dr. Mickel was able to penetrate their defenses by using drones. Do we have anything that might be able to guard against that?"

"We don't have anything." Lane said simply.

"Yeah. If we could mind whammy drones, that might be something, but we don't really have anything that we could use to fight something like that." Duran confirmed.

"I can't think of anything we have, either." Jazz said honestly.

"What about the barrier that we used to protect Brynnhollow?" Lowell asked thoughtfully.

"They already have a barrier, don't they?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"Yes. But ours has been updated many times over the years. I really don't know who established the original Wudewas barrier or if they refresh it at certain intervals, but we might look into getting someone to take a look at it. Maybe it just needs a simple improvement." Lowell explained.

"It sounds like we might be getting in touch with our mutual acquaintance sooner rather than later." Agent Fastbeck said unenthusiastically.

"Is there anything that we still need to do before we go?" Lowell asked as he looked around.

"Not that I can think of. Anyone else?" Agent Fastbeck asked of the group.

After a long moment of silence, Agent Fastbeck continued, "Then I guess we can go. Thank you everyone for your help."

"Is there any reason that we should all hike out together?" Olive asked cautiously.

"No. In fact, it would probably be better if we all left separately, so there's less chance of anyone seeing us as a group." Agent Fastbeck said thoughtfully.

"Agent Roberts, I hope that Conrad will bring you to Brynnhollow to visit sometime soon. I know that everyone will enjoy meeting you. Conrad, be sure to stop by my place to visit next time you're in town. I'd like to be updated on how things are going."

"I'll be sure to do that, Lowell." Agent Fastbeck assured him.

"Make sure to stop and visit Mom, too. She's always happier when you visit." Cain added.

"I'll try to do that." Agent Fastbeck said shyly.

"Are we ready?" Olive asked hopefully.

"Yes. Let's go." Lowell said, then transformed fully into his wolf form.

As he did, Cain turned into the bizarre stripey dog-cat creature. Olive and Jazz turned into their fully canine forms.

Agents Fastbeck and Roberts looked toward Lane and Duran to see what they were going to do.

"We'll walk out with you, if you don't mind." Lane said simply.

"Besides, we left some stuff at your place, so we might as well stick with you." Duran added.

As a response, Agent Fastbeck started walking.

Agent Roberts, Lane and Duran automatically followed.

* * * * *

"Can you think of anything we need to know about what you did to Dr. Mickel and his associates?"

"Well, if you're some kind of insane control freak, then what we did isn't going to work for you. We're not puppet masters pulling their strings. We just embedded imperatives into their minds that they'll be forced to carry out. We'll have to wait and see how they end up following our instructions." Lane said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. There's no doubt that they'll do what we told them to do, but they might end up not doing *everything* exactly the way that we intended." Duran added.

"What are the chances that they're going to break your conditioning and remember everything?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"You don't have to worry about that. We're usually gentle about the way we implant imperatives, so that we won't cause damage to the overall psyche. We didn't have to worry about that so much with these guys. Everything we did is blunt and straightforward." Lane carefully explained.

"Yeah. That's basically because there's nothing to damage. They have no sympathy, empathy or even basic concern for others. When they want something, they just take it and damn everyone else's feelings. All we did is change what they wanted." Duran continued.

"I don't know. It still feels wrong to me." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"We did what needed to be done." Lane said simply.

Agent Roberts was surprised to find that he didn't have an argument for that.

* * * * *

After walking for a few more minutes, Lane moved to Agent Roberts' side and quietly asked, "So, Agent Roberts, how about it? Are you okay with what we did?"

"I'm not happy that you had to do it, but I'll admit that it's probably the best resolution that we could have come up with under the circumstances."

"You know, if all of this is too much for you to deal with, it's still possible for us to make you forget."

Book 3.1: Bacaidhean

Chapter 12

When Agent Roberts arrived at the school, he still had no earthly idea of what his mission was.

As he walked down the hallway, he considered what possible reason a private school would have for requesting the presence of an FBI agent and furthermore, why he would be flown in, all the way from Kentucky, to investigate a case without being given any advance information of what it was about.

"Agent Roberts?" The woman behind the reception desk asked as he entered.

"Yes. I'm a little early. I hope that's okay."

"Of course. If you'll follow me, you'll be meeting in the conference room right over here. Please feel free to help yourself to refreshments. Someone will be joining you in just a minute."

"Thank you." Agent Roberts said as she conducted him to the meeting room.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts had been somewhat scattered trying to get everything done in time for his meeting and hadn't had the chance to get anything to eat. Fortunately, he had found the time to collect his luggage and rent a car before he had to be at his scheduled meeting.

After getting a cup of coffee and selecting a danish from the platter in the middle of the table, Agent Roberts took a seat and waited for whatever was going to happen next.

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts?" A man asked as he walked into the conference room carrying a briefcase.

"Yes." Agent Roberts confirmed as he stood.

"Please don't bother standing. Give me a second to get some coffee and I'll join you over there."

Agent Roberts took the man at his word and sat back down.

"By the way, I'm Aloysius Darroch. I'm the person you're supposed to be meeting with this morning." The man said as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"I thought it was a little bit odd that I wasn't told who I would be meeting when I got here."

Mr. Darroch took the seat at the head of the table, to Agent Roberts' left, then said, "We felt that it would be better not to tell you what we were planning until a few more things had been finalized. Fortunately, in the interim, things seem to have come together so that now I should be able to fill you in on everything that you need to know."

Agent Roberts sipped his coffee and waited for the details of his mysterious assignment to be revealed.

"As you are aware, the South Seid barrier has recently been breached. That has brought to light the need to update and reinforce the barrier to prevent a repeat of such incidents."

"Excuse me Mr. Darroch, but I was under the impression that it was such a big secret that I would probably never hear about it again. I'm surprised to hear you speaking of it so casually."

"It *is* a secret. That's one of the reasons that you weren't told why you were coming here and who you'd be meeting with."

"Okay. I suppose that I can see the necessity of it, although I can't imagine why you'd want for *me* to be involved in anything to do with it."

"I'll get to that." Mr. Darroch promised, then continued, "At first we were simply intending to assemble a team to evaluate and reinforce the South Seid barrier. However, when we attempted to compose a list of prospective team members, we became aware of the serious lack of qualified practitioners in the necessary magical disciplines."

Agent Roberts nodded to indicate that he was following along.

"That's when we decided that since we have this opportunity before us, we should use it to our advantage. To that end, we've asked the administration of this school to recommend students with the best aptitude, power and emotional stability, to be invited to participate in this endeavor and learn these valuable skills."

"I still don't know what that has to do with me."

"Conrad didn't mention how impatient you are."

Agent Roberts couldn't help but notice the obvious name drop and decided to use it to fish for information. "I'm guessing that you're the 'mutual acquaintance' that Lowell mentioned to me."

"I'm acquainted with both Conrad and Lowell." Mr. Darroch confirmed, then continued, "But as to your part in our plans, we were hoping that you could go along as an impartial observer to assure that 'non magical' interests are represented in the decision making."

"Wouldn't Agent Fastbeck be a better choice? I mean, you've known him longer and you already know that you can trust him."

"His 'cursed' state makes him an undesirable candidate for this particular job. As much as we would like to include him, his role in things will have to be severely limited. "

"I'm still not buying it. There's nothing special about *me*, so the only reason I can think of that you'd want me along would be in my capacity as an FBI agent. If I agree to participate, what do you expect of me in that regard?"

Mr. Darroch smiled, then said, "You underestimate your own importance in the grand scheme of things."

"How's that?"

"From what I hear, you're a non magical person who knows about the Shadesiders, The Brynns *and* The Wudewas. There aren't many people who can say that."

Although what Mr. Darroch said was true, Agent Roberts couldn't help but feel that it still didn't add up. Something was still missing to tip the scale in his favor and make including him seem like a good idea.

"You've also been through the full course of military and FBI training, so you're aware of the legalities involved, should that become an issue while we're dealing with non magical people."

Agent Roberts slowly nodded, since he couldn't deny that he was familiar with such things.

"On top of all that, you've demonstrated that you're a decent and trustworthy person. Any one of those traits would make you worthy of consideration, but all of them combined make you the only real choice. To put it bluntly, there is no other *non magical* person that I'm aware of who could do this job."

"Okay. What *is* the job, again?"

"Basically, you're going to be there to keep an eye on the big picture and inject your 'non magical' point of view when you feel it's needed. One of the things you have to watch out for with using magic is that you can get lost in it. The joy of employing your craft and demonstrating your artistry can cause one to lose sight of the

mundane side-effects when there's a great expression of magical power."

"So someone could become so fixated on creating their masterpiece, that they might lose sight of what the original purpose of the project was supposed to be?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yes. It's not something that we generally have to watch out for in our daily lives, but it can sometimes be a problem when we work on extremely big projects."

"Okay. Although I still don't know what you expect me to *do about it*, I understand needing someone along for the express purpose of maintaining a certain level of perspective."

"You'll be acting primarily as a liaison between your FBI office and our group. You're essential to this project because you can see things from all sides. All we're asking of you is to keep an eye on things and if you see something that seems like it's not right, question it."

A knock on the door caused both men to look in that direction.

The school's administrative assistant poked her head in and said, "The teachers are here, if you're ready for them."

"Yes. Thank you Janice. Please show them in." Mr. Darroch said pleasantly.

The woman withdrew, then three people walked in, two men and a woman.

One of the men was older, probably nearing sixty years old. The other two were probably closer to their early thirties.

"Please help yourselves to refreshments while I make introductions. This is Agent Roberts from the FBI. He's going to be joining your team for the upcoming project."

"Why do we need an FBI agent going with us?" The woman asked cautiously.

"He's stationed in the local area where you'll be working, so if nothing else, he can serve as a guide while you're there. But if the local authorities have questions about what a group of strangers are doing out in the middle of nowhere, he can exert his authority to help keep you from having to answer too many inconvenient questions." Mr. Darroch carefully explained.

The woman seemed to accept the answer as she waited for her turn at the coffee carafe.

"Agent Roberts, may I present Professor Everstone, Miss Oaken and Mr. Hansen." Mr. Darroch said as he indicated each in turn, then continued, "They're going to be responsible for the reinforcement and modification of the barrier."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Agent Roberts said obligatorily.

As the group of teachers finished serving themselves, they settled into seats around the table and waited for the meeting to begin.

"All of you have been briefed on what we're going to be doing. Now that you've had time to think about it, have you decided on which students you think would benefit most from accompanying you on this project?" Mr. Darroch asked seriously.

Miss Oaken and Mr. Hansen looked to Professor Everstone to answer, since he was the eldest and most senior of the teachers present.

"I'm afraid that I've run into something of a problem with my selection of students." Professor Everstone said gravely.

"What might that be?" Mr. Darroch asked cautiously.

"To attempt a project of this scale, we're going to need students proficient in Sorcery, Wizardry, Thaumaturgy and adept at Natural Magic specializing in the Earth element." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"When I initiated this project, I was assured that we had an abundance of both teachers and students adept at those disciplines."

"Yes. That's true. We do."

"So, what's the problem?"

"It turns out that both of your sons ranked highly on the list of preferred candidates."

"But how can that be? Paul and G aren't even seniors yet."

"That's true. And while we have many promising students at the senior level, none of them have shown the *adaptability* that your sons have. To put it bluntly, the seniors would probably outperform both of them on any given exercise from the textbooks. But, given the choice, I would rather have your sons with me out in the 'real world', solving *real* problems."

"Paul is a demon summoner. I can't see his specialty being of any use to you in reinforcing a magical barrier."

"He may be a demon summoner, but that's not all that he is. He has demonstrated a variety of other talents including the ability to manipulate multiple spells simultaneously. That coupled with his specialized study of Alchemy makes him an ideal candidate for the team."

"As I'm sure you understand, I'm reluctant to allow Paul to participate in an activity where he might be endangered. He hasn't been my son that long. We're still getting to know each other." Mr. Darroch said quietly, then continued, "But if you honestly think he's the best candidate for the project, I won't object."

"Given what little I know of Paul, I would expect him not only to rise to the challenge, but to thrive as a consequence." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"Yes. That *does* sound like Paul." Mr. Darroch said with a smile of pride.

"As to the fitness of your other son, he has a remarkable natural talent for Sorcery and a strong work ethic. His illusions are, without exception, the best in his class. For this project, we are going to need someone who is dependable and can consistently produce satisfactory results."

"I get the feeling that G looks at his illusions as being of less value than Paul's achievements because they aren't tangible. There's no way I'd stand in the way of him being able to use his illusions for something that really matters."

"As to the other positions, I believe that the Wizardry component can best be filled by Miss Oaken's star pupil, Corabeth Knawld. Of all the high school students we have currently attending, she's the only one who has gained a level of proficiency in manipulating psionic force."

Agent Roberts noticed that Miss Oaken was nodding her agreement.

"Although Paul has many talents, he unfortunately does *not* have a talent for Thaumaturgy. While there are more advanced Thaumaturgy students in the senior year, I feel that it would be best for the project to include Filipe Pena on this journey to fill that role. By all accounts, he and Paul are used to working together and combining their talents. Where one falls short, the other seems to excel."

"Yes. Filipe has been over to our house several times. I've seen how he and Paul seem to inspire and energize each other."

"That leaves us to find students to manipulate Natural Magic and tap into the Earth Element." Professor Everstone said seriously.

"Do you have someone in mind for that?" Mr. Darroch prompted.

"I have to admit that I don't normally have cause to follow the goings on of the students of those disciplines. I believe that, in this instance, I should defer to my colleague, Mr. Hansen."

The expression of surprise on Mr. Hansen's face nearly made Agent Roberts break into a smile.

Before the silence could stretch on too long, Mr. Hansen said, "The manipulation of natural and elemental magic isn't usually seen as being financially viable in the modern world, so not many people choose to specialize in it. Zanner Sands is the only student that I have who actively seeks to *master* his practice of Natural Magic. All the others just do what they have to do to get a grade. As for the Earth Element, Dexter Mulryan is an Oriad. He was born with his elemental affinity. There really is no other choice."

"Dex is an Oriad?" Mr. Darroch asked with surprise.

"Do you know him?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"Yes. He's a friend of my sons'."

"That would explain his improved mood recently. I've been worried about him for quite a while now." Mr. Hansen said slowly.

"He seems like a good kid... a little quiet." Mr. Darroch added.

"I think it will do him a world of good to know that his specialty will be able to help people." Mr. Hansen said with satisfaction.

"Are we ready to call this the finalized list?" Professor Everstone asked as he looked around.

"We can discuss alternates if any of the named students can't accompany us." Mr. Darroch said decisively.

All those gathered seemed to be in agreement.

"Then I suppose that the next step should be to request parental approval for the students to be included in the project." Mr. Darroch said, mostly to Professor Everstone.

"Are we going to call this a field trip?" Miss Oaken asked cautiously.

"No. This will be presented as a 'Work Study' opportunity. If all goes to plan, the students will gain practical experience in using their

various skills in real life situations." Professor Everstone told her frankly, then turned and asked, "Mr. Hansen, would you compose a list of students and ask Janice to contact their parents as soon as possible to gain their permission?"

"Yes Professor. I'll do that right away. Can I assume that I won't need to include Paul and G on that list?"

"They should be included on the list." Professor Everstone said consideringly, then added, "But also make sure that they're checked off as having received the required permission."

"Yes Professor." Mr. Hansen said as he began to write.

"So, the next order of business will be to determine *when* we'll be doing this." Mr. Darroch said professionally.

"Considering the supplies that will need to be gathered, I would think that we could be ready to leave as soon as day after tomorrow." Professor Everstone said speculatively.

"Pending parental approval." Miss Oaken interjected.

"That shouldn't be much of an issue." Mr. Darroch said thoughtfully, then explained, "As a parent, even though I'm reluctant to allow my sons to travel outside my sphere of influence, I appreciate that they have achieved enough to be considered for this special opportunity. I think that any parent will want to do what's best for their children."

"Excuse me if I'm speaking out of turn here..." Agent Roberts cautiously interjected. "...but what are you going to tell the parents that their children will be doing on this 'Work Study' project?"

"The truth... we're just going to leave out one inconsequential detail."

"Which is?"

"Who's living inside the colony that we will be securing."

"Are the kids going to be sworn to secrecy about it?"

"Of course. But you have to understand that our children have been raised to keep secrets. They attend school with non-magical students every single day. One more secret isn't likely to be much of a problem."

"I hope you're right, because you might be endangering the futures of the people you're trying to help... possibly even their survival."

"Tell me, Agent Roberts, before encountering us, in all your military experience and FBI training, did you ever come across anything that would indicate that 'real' witches exist?"

"Well, no."

"We *can* keep secrets."

"So you don't feel like you need to be careful?"

"We're as careful as we need to be and we know who we can trust." Mr. Darroch said simply.

"If everything's settled, perhaps we should invite Mrs. Bright to join us." Professor Everstone suggested.

"Yes. I think that's a good idea. She's been very accommodating and should be included in as much of the planning as possible." Mr. Darroch agreed.

"I'll get her." Mr. Hansen said as he stood, carrying his list of students.

Agent Roberts watched him go and wondered, not for the first time, just what he had gotten himself into.

* * * * *

"Marsha, you know everyone else. Allow me to present Agent Roberts from the FBI."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Marsha said cautiously.

Mr. Darroch smiled at her reaction, then continued, "Thank you for setting all this up for us. We appreciate all the trouble you went to."

"Since you've asked me to join your meeting, can I assume that you've come to some decisions?"

"Yes. As I explained earlier, we've discovered that a hidden site has been compromised, so we're recruiting some of your staff to help us secure it. It turns out that there are very few people available with the necessary experience, so we would like to take a group of students with us to teach those important skills to a new generation."

"I don't think that will be a problem. That's our mission statement, practically word-for-word. What can I do to help you?"

"I've already discussed this with your staff and they've given their recommendations as to which students have the skills and training to make use of what we're going to attempt to teach them. Janice is probably calling parents right now to get their permission for their children to participate in the work study project. We still need to arrange travel, lodgings and transportation for when the group arrives in Waxell."

"Excuse me." Agent Roberts quietly interrupted. As soon as he was sure that he had their attention, he continued, "There aren't any hotels or motels anywhere near Waxell. You can rent rooms in Gooseneck or Grover's Station but then travel time to the location will nearly double and may be an issue."

"I didn't have to rent a room when I was there, so I never had to deal with that." Mr. Darroch said slowly.

"There's a boarding house, but I doubt that Mrs. Shumlin could take in so many at once. I have several unused bedrooms at my house that you'd be welcome to. The only problem is that the rooms haven't been used for a number of years and I have nowhere near enough bedding for everyone."

"We could ask everyone to bring sleeping bags with them, if you think that would work."

"The rooms are plenty big enough. If people won't mind sharing, I should have enough room."

"I'll be sure to get in touch with everyone and let them know before we leave."

"Be sure that everyone brings hiking gear. It's a challenging hike to the location."

"I'll let everyone know..." Mr. Darroch was saying when his phone began to ring.

Mr. Darroch looked at the caller ID before saying, "Jai, this is D, what can I do for you?"

Agent Roberts listened for a moment, then heard Mr. Darroch say, "Actually, I *do* know about that. Both my sons have also been chosen for the work study."

During the pause in Mr. Darroch's conversation, Mr. Hansen made his way back into the room and quietly took his seat.

Mr. Darroch then continued, "I think that this might be good for him. Maybe being able to accomplish something on his own will help him to build his self confidence."

"I understand your concern, but Paul and G won't allow anyone to treat him badly."

"No. I haven't talked to them about it yet, but I'm sure that they'll be interested. Listen, I'm in a meeting right now. Why don't you and Pam bring Dex over to the house for dinner tonight? If you have any questions, I'll do my best to answer them at that time."

After a brief silence, Mr. Darroch smiled, then said, "I'll see you then. Goodbye."

As Mr. Darroch disconnected the call, he looked around the room and explained, "That was Dex's father. He's a little overprotective."

"Should we consider an alternate for Dex?" Professor Everstone asked thoughtfully.

"I'm reasonably sure that Jai will let Dex go with us, but it wouldn't hurt to have someone else in mind, just in case." Mr. Darroch said frankly.

"If it comes down to it, I have the necessary skill and knowledge to do his part of the spell myself. Just understand that me doing it will take considerably more time. But, if possible, I would much rather use this unprecedented opportunity as a teaching experience for Dex." Mr. Hansen said earnestly, then explained, "He might not ever get another chance to use his earth affinity to it's full benefit."

"For now, let's just plan on Dex attending. I think that if I can assure Mr. Mulryan that Dex will be kept safe, that he'll let Dex be included."

"If we have no other pressing matters that require my attention, I need to get back to my students." Mr. Everstone said seriously.

"What I'd like to do next is bring the students in and briefly explain what we're intending to do, so that they'll be able to share that information with their parents. You can stay for that if you're interested, but I think that I can handle it myself if you have other duties."

"As much as I would like to stay for that, I also have other things that I need to be doing right now." Miss Oaken said regretfully as she stood.

"While there are other things that I *could* be doing, I don't want to miss it when you tell Dex about this opportunity." Mr. Hansen said with a smile.

"I'll call the students to the office. It shouldn't take long for me to track them down." Marsha said as she got up from her chair.

Agent Roberts watched as everyone but Mr. Hansen and Mr. Darroch left the room.

Once they were gone, Agent Roberts turned to Mr. Darroch and quietly asked, "Is there any reason for me to be here right now?"

"If you have something else that you need to be doing, I'll understand. But if not, I would appreciate having you present as a witness to these events."

"Why would you need a witness?"

"Sometimes life is messy and things refuse to go to plan. If things end up going that way, I'd like to have an impartial observer present who is aware of everything that's going on at each stage of things. If nothing else, you'll be witness to what was promised and what was agreed to."

"I was only told to come here for this meeting. Do you know if I'm supposed to fly right back to Kentucky or if there's something else for me to do here?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"If you're talking about your 'official' job, this meeting was the only event scheduled. You can return to Waxell right away if you feel the need to, but I was hoping that you might be willing to delay that and go with the group to serve as their guide." Mr. Darroch said carefully.

"But I can go back now and act as their guide when they arrive." Agent Roberts said simply, then slowly asked, "What else are you hoping that I'll do between now and the time the 'Work Study' group leaves?"

"I can see why you're with the FBI." Mr. Darroch said with a grin, then continued, "As much as I would like to go with you, I have other commitments that require my presence. It was my hope that you could function as a stabilizing influence for the group.

"While the teachers are all excellent role models, they also have a particular mindset when it comes to magic. I can see you being the perfect counterbalance, not only for the project, but also for the children. They'll be able to look at you and see someone who can stay focused on the job without getting lost in the spectacle of it."

"So you want me to be a babysitter?" Agent Roberts ventured.

"No!" Mr. Darroch laughed, then explained, "I just want for you to stay focused on the job at hand. And if, at some point along the way, some of the children notice what you're doing, maybe you could help them understand the importance of maintaining focus and seeing a job through to its conclusion."

"So you want for me to be a role model?"

"Yes. I suppose that's part of it." Mr. Darroch said consideringly.

"Why would you want for a normal human to be a role model for a witch?"

"Because you have admirable character traits. I noticed the same thing with Conrad. Maybe it comes with the FBI training, I'm not really sure. But all I'm really asking is for you to be yourself and do your job."

"That would be a lot easier if I had a job to do. You just want for me to stay here and wait around for however long it takes to get your 'Work Study' project ready to go?"

"I suppose that's true on the surface, but during that time you can also be getting to know the different members of the group and observe how they work together. The better you understand the individuals and how they can best function as a team, the better our chance for success."

"You talk almost like I'm going to be in charge of things." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"No. Professor Everstone will be in charge. He's the one who will be coordinating all the work on the barrier. But when it comes to things like lodgings, food, transportation, hiking to the location and probably a dozen other things that I'm just not thinking of, it's going to fall to you to take charge. You have the knowledge of the area as well as a level head and the organizational skills to make the project a success. If you'll take a moment to look at it, I think

you'll agree that you will be able to make a significant contribution."

"So you're saying that I'll be in charge of everything *except* the magic. Is that right?"

"I can't predict how things will go when you're actually out there. But I can't imagine things going nearly as well sending a team from here into rural Kentucky without someone from the local area to help them with the practical matters."

"And why is it that you chose me instead of Agent Fastbeck, again?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"He's cursed. But beyond that, he carries the ability to bestow a curse. I wouldn't want to have him anywhere near the barrier site when a massive magical enchantment is being cast. It's impossible to predict what might happen if somehow the magic being used were to interact with him."

"Okay. That makes a lot more sense."

"When you arrive, Conrad will need to explain your mission to the Wudewas elders. But after that, it would probably be best if he's involved as little as possible."

"Is the curse something that I need to worry about when *I'm* around Agent Fastbeck?"

"No. It's only an issue under very specific conditions. It just so happens that those conditions are likely to be present when the barrier is reconfigured."

"Are you ready to talk to the students?" Marsha asked from the doorway.

"Yes. Thank you. Please send them in." Mr. Darroch answered.

Agent Roberts watched as a group of young teenagers filed into the conference room.

"I had a feeling that it was you." A skinny boy with dark hair and eyes said with a grin.

Even if Agent Roberts hadn't been told that Mr. Darroch's sons were among the chosen few, he would have made the connection. The skinny boy's coloring and features were virtually identical to those of Mr. Darroch. However, if one of the others were his other son, there wasn't enough of a family resemblance to make it obvious.

"Psionic force, Sorcery, Thaumaturgy... and Nature Magic?" A boy with medium brown hair and eyes said speculatively as he looked around, then thoughtfully continued, "It's a barrier problem, isn't it?"

Agent Roberts was frankly impressed by the boy's deductive reasoning skills.

"That's right." Mr. Darroch confirmed, then continued, "We were hoping that if you're willing, you could work as a group to help us fix it."

"Are Cain and Deimos alright?" Mr. Darroch's son asked suddenly.

"They're fine. You don't need to worry about them. This is something else." Mr. Darroch immediately assured him.

"Something's not right here. If there's a barrier failing, why would you get a bunch of kids together to try and fix it? What's *really* going on?" The medium brown haired boy asked suspiciously.

"If you'll hold on for one minute, I'll tell you." Mr. Darroch said indulgently to the boy, then said more toward the whole group, "Everyone, I'd like for you to meet Agent Roberts from the FBI."

"*Another* FBI agent?" The boy asked cautiously.

Mr. Darroch let the question go without comment and continued, "Agent Roberts, may I present your prospective team. I assume that this young lady is Corabeth, she will be performing the necessary Wizardry. Next to her is my son, G, who will be providing the needed Sorcery."

Agent Roberts was not at all surprised to confirm that the dark haired boy was indeed Mr. Darroch's son.

"Next to G is Filipe, who will serve as our Thaumaturge. Assisting Filipe will be my son, Paul, who may have the opportunity to use some of the Alchemy that he's been studying."

Agent Roberts took a good long look at Paul. He still couldn't see any family resemblance, but when he considered the quick wit and dominant personality that the boy appeared to have, he couldn't deny that he seemed to be the perfect son for Mr. Darroch.

"I'm assuming that the platinum blond is Zanner, our specialist in Natural Magic and last but not least, the redhead is Dex, our expert in the Earth Element."

"So what's the story? If there's a barrier failing somewhere, why would you ask *us* to take care of it?" Paul asked firmly.

"Who would you rather I ask?" Mr. Darroch asked in return.

"There's probably about a dozen or so teachers just here at the school who could do it." Paul said immediately.

"I suppose that's true, if you're only looking at magical ability. But if you narrow it down to those with the specialized knowledge and training, you end up with less than ten. And mind you, not all of those are physically able to make the trip to the remote location to enact the ritual."

Paul seemed to be at a loss to refute Mr. Darroch's explanation.

"As Paul has rightly deduced, there is a barrier that is in need of upgrading and reinforcement. When we attempted to gather a team to rectify the situation, we came to the realization that we are disturbingly low on qualified personnel to deal with such a circumstance. It is for that reason that we've assembled your group so that we can take you into the *real* world to do a *real* job. Of course you'll have teachers with you to guide you, but they won't do the job for you. We're depending on you... an entire colony of

people will be depending on you to protect them." Mr. Darroch finished gravely.

After a moment to process what Mr. Darroch had said, Paul slowly asked, "What about the FBI agent? I don't get why he's going along."

"Agent Roberts is one of the main reasons that the colony still exists. He and Agent Fastbeck were instrumental in preventing outsiders from exposing or destroying the colony. It's thanks to their work that we were even notified that there *was* a problem."

Paul's appraising glance seemed to peer right through Agent Roberts' soul.

"There are several more reasons that I'd rather not get into right now, but suffice it to say that Agent Roberts has an important part to play in this endeavour.

Agent Roberts noticed that the redhead, Dex, had moved past Zanner to say something to Paul quietly.

"Is there a problem?" Mr. Darroch asked cautiously.

"Dex doesn't think that his parents will let him go." Paul said simply.

"I invited Dex's family to dinner at our house tonight. Maybe with your help, we can convince his parents that he'll be kept safe."

"When are we going to be doing this?" Filipe asked cautiously.

Agent Roberts looked at the Hispanic boy and realized that he appeared to be a year or two younger than all the rest in attendance.

"We're still making those arrangements; probably in the next day or two. I'll see that everyone is emailed as soon as we're committed to a time and date."

Agent Roberts was impressed as he realized that all of the students were taking the meeting very seriously.

"In the meantime, it's been suggested that everyone might want to be sure that they have sleeping bags and hiking gear."

"We're going to be camping?" Corabeth asked with a look of obvious distaste.

"No. At least, we're not planning on it. But Agent Roberts has offered to allow you all to stay at his house during this project. While he has enough rooms for everyone, he doesn't have enough bedding... hence the need for sleeping bags."

"And the hiking gear?" Corabeth asked slowly.

"You'll have to hike to get to the location. It would kind of defeat the purpose of having a hidden compound if there were a road running right up to it." Mr. Darroch said frankly.

"But there's a road that runs..." G began to say, but was stopped by a quelling glance from his father.

"There's just one more thing. What we're going to be doing is a secret. I'm sure that if you tell your parents that you're going to be included in a Work Study program at school and that you won't be able to talk about it, that they'll understand. These things occasionally happen. It's one of those things that everyone knows, but nobody talks about."

Chapter 13

"Did you need for me to make travel arrangements?" Marsha asked cautiously.

"No. I think that I'll be in a better position to do that. But if you wouldn't mind, would you email me with the full names of everyone in the group as soon as all the permissions have been obtained? Don't worry about Dex Mulryan, I'll be talking to his parents about getting their permission at dinner tonight."

"Yes. Of course."

"I'm going to be working from home the rest of the day, so you can contact me there if you have any questions or concerns."

"I'll do that. And thank you for doing this. It's not only good that you're helping to protect those vulnerable people, but you're also providing a unique opportunity for the students to learn a valuable skill that they might not have a chance to learn otherwise."

"It was simply a matter of recognizing an opportunity when it arose. Beyond that, I did what anyone else would do."

"You're assuming that 'anyone else' would do *something*. In my experience, that's not a foregone conclusion."

"I suppose that's true." Mr. Darroch conceded, then he turned to Agent Roberts and asked, "Are you about ready to go?"

"Where are we going?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"To my house. I can do everything else that needs to be done from there." Mr. Darroch said seriously, then added, "You'd be welcome to stay with us, if you'd like."

"Are you sure? Business is one thing, but I wouldn't want to intrude on your private life."

"I'm sure that the spectre of the impending trip is going to be a major part of my life whether you're visiting with us or not. But since you're offering to open your home to the Work Study Group, it's only right that I respond in kind."

"If you're sure that you have enough room..."

"Actually, the entire Work Study Group could stay with us and there would be no shortage of room."

"I've got all my stuff in the rental car. So whenever you're ready, lead the way."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts replayed the events of the meeting in his mind as he drove. He was aware enough of what was going on to take notice of the beautiful scenery.

When they turned off the main road, he passed through a wrought iron gate. Agent Roberts' first impulse was to assume that they were entering a gated community. But as he continued on, he realized that there weren't any buildings visible.

When he finally crested the rise, an enormous building came into view. At the sight of it, Agent Roberts had no problem believing that Mr. Darroch actually *could* accommodate the entire Work Study Group.

By the time Agent Roberts pulled his rental car to a stop, he had come to the conclusion that the project they were embarking upon was a worthwhile endeavor. Not only were they going to protect the Wudewas, but it was also an unprecedented learning opportunity for the students.

Leaving the magical aspects aside, he was honored to be allowed to participate. Mr. Darroch had convinced him of his importance to the project and he felt that he had something unique to contribute.

"Go ahead and bring your suitcase." Mr. Darroch said as he got out of his car.

Agent Roberts considered taking his 'bug out' bag of hiking gear with him, but decided that it would be senseless to carry it in and then have to carry it right back out.

"I hope you're not too full from the snacks at the meeting. We should be having lunch before very long."

"No problem. I just had coffee and a danish. If anything, it could be considered an appetizer." Agent Roberts said as he followed Mr. Darroch into the house.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of walking, Agent Roberts began wondering if it might have been better if he had brought his hiking gear. The labyrinthine maze of hallways seemed to be endless.

"Let's stop in and see if Beth is around."

Agent Roberts had no idea who that was and didn't really have any choice but to follow Mr. Darroch into one of the rooms.

* * * * *

"How has your day been?" Mr. Darroch asked gently as he walked into the room.

"Everything's fine. K's been trying to sit up. She's almost got it." The woman said proudly.

"Beth, I'd like for you to meet Agent Roberts from the FBI."

"Please call me Shawn."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Shawn. I'm Beth and this young lady is our daughter K."

"She's a real beauty." Shawn said as he looked at the little girl with wonder.

"She is, isn't she?" Mr. Darroch said proudly, then reluctantly continued, "Shawn and I have some business to attend to. Is there anything I can do for you before we go?"

"No. I'll be fine for a while."

"We're not going to be doing anything that can't be interrupted. Please feel free to call if you need anything at all."

"I think K is just about due for a nap. Once she's asleep, I'm going to call Kayla about the nursery furniture designs."

"Beth and my cousin Kyla are starting up a baby furniture business." Mr. Darroch explained.

"We're just coming up with the designs." Beth said quickly. "But when we were setting up the nursery, we realized that no one was offering *exactly* what we were looking for, so we decided to design the nursery furniture that we actually *were*looking for."

"I'm sure that when your designs go into production that new parents will be overjoyed to have some more options to choose from." Mr. Darroch said warmly.

"Go do your work. I'll call you when lunch is ready."

Mr. Darroch gave his wife a quick kiss and a hug before leading the way out of the room.

* * * * *

"So you have three kids?" Agent Roberts asked as they walked.

"Yes. Beth and I each had a son from previous relationships then, when we got together, along came K."

"From what I saw of your sons in the meeting, you have reason to be very proud."

"I'd like to take credit for that, but I honestly think that Beth and I ended up with good kids. As far as I know, neither of us did

anything different from any other parent when we were raising them."

"So you don't think the fact that you're a... you know... has anything to do with it?" Agent Roberts asked uncomfortably.

"You can use the 'W' word when it's just us. But please be aware that we sometimes have non-magical people over to visit, so it's best to be sure about who's in on the secret before you start talking about it." Mr. Darroch said as they walked into a very nice bedroom.

"I'm still not sure about what to say and I wouldn't want to offend anyone." Agent Roberts said seriously, then continued, "When I met the Brynns, they were usually referred to as 'The Cursed Ones'."

"Yes. Since they've been denied access to their magical abilities for countless generations, I suppose it would stand to reason that they wouldn't see themselves as fitting into the same category as your everyday run of the mill witches." Mr. Darroch said thoughtfully, then added as an aside, "If it's alright with you, this will be your room."

"Really?" Agent Roberts said in surprise, since the room was nicer than any he had ever stayed in before. Amazingly, it was even bigger than his bedroom back in Waxell, and *that* was enormous.

Mr. Darroch smiled, then said, "If you'd like to leave your suitcase here, we can go to my office so that we can start making arrangements."

"Oh, yeah." Agent Roberts stammered, then set his suitcase down just inside the door.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts followed Mr. Darroch to his office, which looked surprisingly ordinary.

"If you need to use a computer, feel free to use any of the laptops by the door."

"Thank you. I'll do that... except, I don't know what you need for me to do."

"Since you have firsthand knowledge of the location and terrain, maybe you could construct an itinerary and list of needed supplies."

"Good idea. I'll get right on that." Agent Roberts said as he selected one of the laptops.

"While you're doing that, I'll see what I can do to pin down an exact time for our departure and travel arrangements."

"Is it waiting for the permission for the kids that's holding you back?"

"No. I'm confident that the email with all the permissions and individual information will be here shortly. Actually, it's gathering the supplies that's the bigger problem. In most cases, large magical productions require the use of elaborate and rare artifacts to channel the power and allow it to be used in a meaningful way."

"So you're waiting for some big barrier making tool to arrive?"

"Yes. Well, more than one, but essentially that's what we're waiting for."

"If you're having it delivered, you could schedule the delivery to be sent to the Waxell FBI office." Agent Roberts suggested.

"It's not quite that easy. I can't get into why, but suffice it to say that certain things need to be done a certain way. "

"I'll take your word for it, but if there's some sort of ritual dictating the timetable, is it possible to predict when all the pieces will be ready?"

"I think so. This sort of thing is well outside my own area of expertise. I'm going to have to contact a few people to see if they can give me their estimates before I can make an estimate of my own for the overall project."

"So, while you're doing that, I'll be making a non-magical supply list and a schedule of things that we need to remember?"

"That's the plan."

"Then let's do it."

* * * * *

Making a list of needed supplies for a hiking group of ten people, including himself, was less challenging than he expected. Thanks to his military training, he had the list over half composed in his head before he ever started writing it.

The itinerary, not so much.

He wasn't familiar enough with the project to make any sort of timetable. He was even less familiar with the members of the team and any special accommodations that they might need.

Professor Everstone appeared to be physically fit, but his age was a concerning factor. Filipe was younger and smaller than the rest of the group, so that needed to be taken into account. Dex appeared to be somewhat delicate, so it would be good to allow for that as well.

In the end he fashioned a timetable which called for breaks after each of the more challenging aspects of the hike.

"Bad news." Mr. Darroch said abruptly, breaking the long silence between them.

"What's that?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"If you leave day after tomorrow, like I was initially planning, it looks like you're going to be hiking nearly the whole way in pouring rain."

"Is there another option?"

"Possibly. If we advance the schedule for you to leave early tomorrow morning, you *should* be able to make camp before the rain starts."

"But won't we still have to hike in during the rain the following day?"

"It's too early to tell for sure. You *might* be able to hike in between downpours. But either way, I can imagine that hiking *to* the camp in the rain might be considerably less miserable than *setting up* camp in the rain."

"I suppose that's true. But what about the tools that we need that aren't ready?"

"I'll need to talk to Professor Everstone about possibly leaving someone behind to travel with the artifacts while the rest go on ahead to set up camp. Since I'm not familiar with the components that he intends to use there may be a need for special handling."

"Does that mean it's something heavy or dangerous?"

"Either or both. And if it's something derived from another dimensional plane, we may have to worry about reality disruptions."

"I'm not sure what that is, but that sounds like something we shouldn't be messing with."

"We actually don't get much choice in the matter. Depending on what tools they need to do the job, we might be stuck having to deal with something that has the potential to do more harm than good."

"What are we going to do if that happens?"

"Take whatever precautions are prudent and carry on as best we can. The only impact that it should have on any of your plans is if it forces us to adjust our timetable. We'll deal with the rest."

"Okay. Any idea of when the initial group will be leaving?"

"Give me a few minutes to make some calls. As soon as I've been able to confirm that everyone will be available, I'll let you know when our flight will be departing."

"Can you give me an estimate?"

"Best case scenario, we'll be leaving for the airport from here at around five in the morning."

"I can work with that. Just let me know if anything changes."

"Will do."

* * * * *

"*Find a good stopping point. Lunch will be served in a few minutes. I've invited Lisa to join us.*" Beth's voice announced over the intercom.

"Perfect timing." Mr. Darroch said with a smile.

"How are things going with the travel arrangements?"

"So far, everything seems to be falling into line. All the participants have said that they can make it... except for Dex, and we'll be talking to his family at dinner."

"What about hiking supplies and sleeping bags? Do you know if everyone's going to be bringing their own?"

"Yes. Although I got the impression that there might be a few hurried shopping trips tonight, everyone has committed themselves to having all the personal supplies that they will need."

"Good. But even if someone ends up forgetting something, they have a decent inventory at the feed store in Waxell. I'm not planning on stopping by there, but it's good to know that it's there if we need it."

"It's always best to have a backup plan." Mr. Darroch said sagely, then thought to add, "Lisa is going to be joining us for lunch. She helps Beth in the afternoons, to give her a little break from constantly caring for K."

"Is there anything I need to not talk about in front of her?"

Mr. Darroch signalled that he was ready to go, then said, "I don't typically discuss business in front of her, but that's just because it has nothing to do with her. I can't think of any topics that are 'off limits', except within the constraints of polite conversation."

"I don't think that will be a problem."

"I know that you weren't planning on staying the night. Is there anything that you can think of that you'll be needing?"

"I should be fine." Agent Roberts assured him, then continued, "I learned early on to be prepared for unexpected diversions. That's probably the first lesson that I learned when I entered the field."

"That's good. But if you think of anything, be sure to let us know."

"I'll do that."

* * * * *

"So, how is everyone doing?" Mr. Darroch asked as they entered the dining room.

"Lisa was just saying that it would be a perfect day to take K to the park, so I think we're probably going to do that this afternoon." Beth answered.

"How did things go with your meeting?"

"Kyla is working on some new ideas for a line of outdoor play equipment, so she's going to get that drawn up and we'll meet again later."

"That sounds like an interesting idea. I don't know enough about what's already on the market to be able to guess if that's a viable idea or not. I can't wait to see what you two will come up with."

"We'll be sure to commission a market comparison before we commit to anything. But from what I saw while we were shopping

for K, it looks to me like there's a niche market just waiting for someone to come along and fill it."

"Shawn is going to be spending the night tonight. I put him in the first guest room."

"That should be far enough away from K's room that he shouldn't be disturbed if K gets fussy during the night."

"She's a good baby. She doesn't fuss without a good reason." Mr. Darroch said with an adoring look at his daughter.

Agent Roberts followed his gaze and smiled at the little girl who seemed to be perfectly content in her stroller.

"I still think it'll be a good idea to have her a few rooms away from our guest. Just in case." Beth said frankly.

"Oh, I forgot to mention earlier, I invited the Mulryans over for dinner tonight. I hope that won't interfere with your plans."

"I don't have anything planned at all." Beth said simply, then asked, "Is there some sort of occasion, or were you just being sociable?"

"I wanted to talk to them about the work study that the boys are going on. They're a little reluctant to allow Dex to go."

"Does that include our boys?" Beth asked curiously.

"Yes. They'll probably be gone for a few days."

"What will they be doing?"

"Applying some of what they've been studying in a real world situation."

"Are you sure that Paul's ready for something like that? He's still very new at using his abilities." Beth asked with concern.

"I'm not sure if he's ready, but his teachers seem to think that he is. This isn't just about raw power, but also about being able to adapt

to the circumstances at hand. His teachers seem to appreciate his ability to think on his feet."

"What about G?"

"I get the sense that they appreciate G's dedication to his craft. Although there may be students who are more advanced, G is serious about putting forth his best effort every single time. They need someone with that mindset for a job like this."

"I'm guessing that you can't discuss the details of what they'll be doing."

"No. Not really."

"Is it going to be dangerous?" Beth asked cautiously, then looked at Shawn with realization.

"It shouldn't be." Mr. Darroch said reassuringly.

Beth's gaze remained on Agent Roberts as she quietly said, "I would be *very* upset if anything were to happen to *either* of the boys."

Ice seemed to flow through Agent Roberts' veins as he understood just how serious her implied threat was.

"Agent Roberts will be there to see that *all* the members of the team return to us safely." Mr. Darroch assured her.

Although Beth didn't voice a response, the phrase, '*He'd better*' was clearly seen in her eyes.

* * * * *

As expected, when lunch was finished, Mr. Darroch and Agent Roberts went back to work on their individual tasks.

"We may have a change of plans." Mr. Darroch said after hanging up his phone.

Agent Roberts had been so focused on his work he hadn't been paying attention to what Mr. Darroch had been doing.

"What's that?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"It turns out that one of the artifacts that we'll be needing to use can only be had if we agree to certain terms."

"How much are they asking?"

"It's not money. The caretaker of the artifact won't allow us to take it with us. He insists on going along, so that he can protect it."

"Is this person going to want to participate in the spell with you?"

"No. He's willing to let us use it, but he won't let us take it out of his sight."

"Well, is there something else we can use in its place?"

"Yes. But any of the alternatives would significantly throw off our timetable. The only options I can see available to us are to accept his terms or reschedule the entire affair."

"Is it really important to repair the barrier right now?"

"Things that get put off tend to be looked upon as less and less important until they're finally forgotten. If we don't repair the barrier right now, the chances of it ever being repaired diminish significantly."

"Okay. I couldn't understand what the rush was all about, but I can see that." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully, then added, "Thank you for making this a priority. The Wudewas are lucky to have someone like you watching out for their interests."

"We're both on their side, so let's do our best not to let them down."

"So to get the job done, we're going to have to let this guy travel with us. Is that his only demand?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"Yes. In fact, he has stated that he'll see to his own accommodations. If we'll provide the time and place where he needs to meet us, he has promised to be present with the artifact in hand."

"Sounds like a setup to me. If we don't have any other choice but to do this, I'd like to make the initial contact with him on my own."

"No. We need for you to lead the party to the location. Besides, I think you'll have a greater chance of success with the group to back you up. I don't want to offend you by saying so, but you're not equipped to stand up against a reasonably powered witch. I don't know what kind of power Mr. Brown possesses, but without any magical defenses, you'd be at a great disadvantage."

"What do you think the chances are that he's going to try something?"

"Actually, I'd say that it's most likely that he's exactly what he claims to be and that his insistence to go along is for the reason that he's stated. Not only is the artifact rare and valuable, but it also holds great power. It seems reasonable that such an item would be assigned a protector to see that it doesn't fall into the wrong hands."

"What can it do?"

"I know that it's nature based, but I don't really know much beyond that. I'm not an expert on ancient magical relics. Professor Everstone could probably tell you about it in detail."

"So, if I'm getting what you're saying, then we really have no choice but to accept this man's terms. Is that right?"

"The only other choice would be to scrap all the plans that we've made so far and hope that we'll be able to get everyone that we need together when we're able to secure another suitable artifact."

"Then I suppose that we'll do what we have to do." Agent Roberts said unenthusiastically, then continued by asking, "What does this do to our timetable?"

"We'll just have to wait and see. For right now, we'll proceed as we would have without his participation. When he shows up, he'll just have to work around *your* timetable."

"Okay. I suppose that's a place to start." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully, then cautiously asked, "What can you tell me about the ceremony or ritual or whatever it is that they'll be doing? I'd like to get an idea of how long it will take."

"I talked to Professor Everstone about that and all he could tell me was that they're going to have to examine what's already present before they can make any judgements about what to do next. As far as a timetable, he couldn't be specific. It could take from two days to a week, depending on what they're facing."

"I guess it doesn't matter. If we're going to be hiking in and out each day, then we'll be able to resupply whatever provisions that we'll be using."

"Don't count out the possibility that you might have to spend a night or two at the location. Again, there's no way to know until you're on site and have evaluated the job at hand."

"I'll keep that in mind. If it comes to that, we should be able to manage."

"One piece of good news is that Professor Everstone has been able to secure another of the relics and he'll be bringing it with him."

"Is he going to need any extra help with it?"

"He says that he won't. Just be sure that you don't touch it. If the relic is a reservoir of enduring magical power, it might be dangerous for a non-magical being."

"I'll be sure to be careful." Agent Roberts assured him, then cautiously asked, "But what's likely to happen if I touch something like that, a magical item, I mean?"

"Most magical items are completely safe for you to handle. The enchantments that they carry access the magic of the witch holding them. Since you don't have any inherent magic, they would just be inert in your hands."

Agent Roberts nodded that he understood.

"More powerful objects have protections in place to prevent a non-magical person from using them. They will either bestow a curse or just kill you."

"How common are things like that?"

"Not very." Mr. Darroch assured him, then explained, "In the old days it was more common for the average witch to need such things in their daily lives. In the modern age, it's less likely for a witch to need a tool that requires more than their own personal magic."

"So that's why you call them artifacts?" Agent roberts guessed.

"No. The artifacts are in a different class. I was speaking more of the enchanted tools that people sometimes use to do large difficult projects at home. Artifacts tend to be of such power that they belong to an entire community."

"And we're going to have things *that* powerful with us?"

"Yes." Mr. Darroch confirmed, then explained, "Think about what it is that you're actually doing. You're going to be protecting an entire colony from the outside world. It's going to take an incredible amount of specialized magic to do that. These tools were crafted for the specific purpose of channeling that amount of magic and directing it to the use that you're intending."

Agent Roberts thought about that for a moment, then speculatively said, "And even with the artifacts, there's the possibility that the magic is going to go out of control."

"Yes. That's possible." Mr. Darroch confirmed.

"But you're going to send your kids anyway?"

"Yes." Mr. Darroch said simply, then explained, "Professor Everstone, Miss Oaken and Mr. Hansen could probably do this spell without any outside help, but we wouldn't have any backup plan to help them if something went wrong. Having the students perform the spell with the three of them there as backup is an extra layer of assurance that not only will we achieve our goal of restoring the barrier, but also that the practitioners will come through the experience safely."

"And the kids gaining the understanding and experience is just an added bonus and doesn't really figure into your plan at all?"

"It wasn't a determining factor."

"Okay. That makes a lot more sense. You're sending the students to do the job and the mentors not only to train them, but also as a failsafe if the students can't handle it on their own."

"Right." Mr. Darroch said simply, then added more quietly, "I didn't intend for either of my sons to be included in this project. I suppose that it's good that they were. It's forced me to take another look at what I'm doing to be sure that we're not taking any unnecessary risks."

"Even so, it sounds like there's going to be some danger involved."

"Yes. There is the potential for things to go wrong."

"Is there anything more that we can do to minimize that danger?"

"I really don't know. It might have been better for me to arrange for a group of more powerful and experienced witches to enact the spell and leave the children out of it. I could even pass the entire

project off to someone else to deal with and wash my hands of it entirely."

"What would be so wrong with that?"

"I would feel as though I were abandoning the people of Brynnhollow and Waxell. I'd be leaving them to the care of people who have no personal connection to them."

"You said before that I'm going along to protect the interests of non-magical people. Is that what you're talking about?"

"You've got a stake in the outcome. You'll at least *question* how the decisions being made will affect the people around you."

"So you're not just trying to protect the Wudewas. You're trying to make things work out for the best for everyone."

"That's the plan. Now we just have to see if we can pull it off."

"I'm surprised that you're not going along to personally supervise."

"Even if I could get away from my work long enough to do that, they don't need me underfoot, second guessing them and being a distraction."

"You've got me for that."

"In a sense. You're there to keep things pointed in the right direction. But if I were there, they'd be expecting me to lead and coordinate things. My own magical specialty isn't something that could be of any benefit to the project and my presence would provide unnecessary complications."

"But since I'm not a witch and I'm not in charge, I can go along as a *regulating* influence without being a distraction from their primary reason for being there."

"Right."

"Okay. I think I understand my role."

"Good. Now let's get back to work. We both still have things that need to be done."

"I'll see what I can do to make allowances for our unexpected teammate."

"If you can work him in, that's fine. But don't go too much out of your way."

"If he ends up booking a room in Gooseneck, it's going to double his travel time. That could end up impacting our timetable."

"I suppose." Mr. Darroch grudgingly agreed, then continued, "And we *do* need his artifact."

"Let me see what I can do."

* * * * *

"Your flight will depart at seven fifteen in the morning. "

"Have you gotten the approvals from everyone?"

"I've made all the reservations but we'll still have to wait and see how things go with Dex."

"How sure are you that he'll be allowed to participate."

"More than half. But if Dex can't do it, they should still be able to enact the ritual without him. As I understand the powers that they'll be dealing with, having Dex there will actually make things a whole lot easier for everyone involved. But they'll be able to manage regardless."

"But everyone else has accepted?"

"Yes. I've received an email from Mrs. Bright at the school confirming that all the parents except Dex's have given their approval."

"What's left for us to do?"

"I think that we've done everything that we can for the moment. We've taken action. Now we have to wait for the *reaction*."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"I've made the travel arrangements. You've made the timetable and supply list. We've done all that we can do with the information at hand. Now we have to wait for Professor Everstone or someone else involved to contact us to tell us why what we're planning won't work so that we can adjust the plan."

"It's good that you're already planning for that."

"It's what I do."

"Do you want to look at the supply list? If we're leaving in the morning, we're going to have to go shopping soon."

"Just attach it to an email to me and I'll get someone to take care of it."

"Do you think it's going to be a problem transporting all the supplies to Kentucky?"

"No. Unless you have something beyond what you've indicated on your lists, you should be able to carry everything with you as luggage. We might have to pay a little extra, but I don't have any problem with that."

"Okay. If you're sure..." Agent Roberts trailed off uncertainly.

"Since I'm not going with you, I'm doing everything in my power to make sure that you'll have everything that you need to make this mission a success. If it costs a little extra to make things easier on your group, so be it."

"Thanks."

"But if you've done everything that you can with the itinerary, I'd like to take a look at it. I might be able to make some suggestions.

"Okay. Let's do this." Agent Roberts said as he turned his attention back to the laptop that he'd been using and got back to work.

Chapter 14

"Dad!" Paul said from Mr. Darroch's study doorway.

"I didn't realize that it was so late. How was your day?" Mr. Darroch asked pleasantly.

"Fine." Paul said distractedly, then resumed his previous intensity by asking, "What's going on?"

"Agent Roberts and I have been making travel arrangements for your upcoming adventure." Mr. Darroch said simply, then asked, "What's going on with you?"

Agent Roberts noticed that G was standing just behind Paul, waiting expectantly for answers.

"Where's the barrier that we're going to be fixing? Who is the barrier protecting? Why are *we* going?" Paul asked insistently.

"Waxell, Wudewas, and because your teachers thought that out of all the students, you would be best able to do the job."

After a moment to consider his father's answers, Paul carefully asked, "You said that Cain and Deimos were alright?"

"Yes. This is unrelated to them."

"So does that mean that there's another place like Brynnhollow around Waxell?"

"Yes."

"You said Wudewas. I studied about them in my health and healing class. Aren't they like bigfoots or something like that?"

"Yes."

"And there's a colony of them near Waxell?"

"Yes."

"And their barrier is failing?"

"It's not so much *failing* as it is out-of-date. Current technology has been able to breach it, so we need to assess the condition of the barrier, then update it."

"If the Wudewas barrier is so close to Brynnhollow, why didn't they help them? Their barrier is great."

"The Wudewas community is called Southseid. And to answer your question, the people of Brynnhollow don't have access to their magical abilities. If there were a problem with the Brynnhollow barrier, they would have called on us to fix it." Mr. Darroch said seriously, then added, "Remember why we were visiting Brynnhollow in the first place."

"Yeah. Okay." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Before it gets too late, you guys need to go to the storeroom and get your sleeping bags and take stock of what you have as far as hiking gear. See if there's anything that you'll be needing for tomorrow. You'll be leaving for the airport at around five fifteen in the morning."

"We're leaving tomorrow?" G asked in surprise.

"That's right. So you don't really have time to be standing around asking endless questions."

"What will we need to take with us?" G asked in an overwhelmed whisper.

"Perhaps, if you asked him very nicely, Agent Roberts could go over his supply list with you to see that you'll have everything that you need." Mr. Darroch suggested with a grin.

"Agent Roberts, can you go with us right now? If we're going to need stuff for tomorrow morning, we need to figure out what it is right away." Paul asked hopefully.

"Do you think that was 'nicely' enough?" Mr. Darroch asked in a mostly serious tone.

"I'm buying it." Agent Roberts said with a smile, then said to the boys, "Why don't you show me what you've already got and we can work from there."

"Okay. I know right where everything is." G said enthusiastically.

"Do I have up-to-date copies of all your lists?" Mr. Darroch asked before Agent Roberts could exit the room.

"Yes. I've emailed you everything." Agent Roberts assured him, then noticed the urgent looks on the two boys' faces and followed along.

* * * * *

"How much stuff do you think we're going to need?"

"The most important thing is going to be decent hiking boots. After that, you're going to need comfortable clothes that you can layer, then rain gear."

"I think we're covered for the clothes and boots, but we'll show you what we've got so we can be sure that it's alright. We have a lot of camping gear out in the storeroom, like backpacks and tents and stuff. We should look at that first."

"That sounds perfect. Once I've seen what you've got, I'll get with your father about what we're still going to need."

"Did we need to look at the train to see if we left anything there?" Paul asked his brother uncertainly.

"No. I'm pretty sure we got everything out. Dad's really good about double-checking after we get back from the lake."

* * * * *

As they walked out the back door, G led the way to a freestanding building a short distance from the house.

Agent Roberts followed along and took in the beautiful scenery surrounding them.

"Just so you know, this door has a magical lock. If you need to get in, make sure that I'm here with you." G said as he pulled the heavy door open.

"I really suck at locking spells." Paul added, then explained, "I mean, I can open it, but it might take me a few tries."

"It's easier if you just get me to let you in." G confided.

Agent Roberts smiled in response, but didn't answer verbally.

* * * * *

"Here's the camping stuff. What do you think we're going to need?" Paul asked as they approached shelves of camping supplies.

"At first glance, it looks like you might already have most of what we'll be needing." Agent Roberts said as he examined the equipment, then thought to ask, "Do you guys go camping often?"

"Dad and I have gone a lot. But Paul's only been with us a couple times."

"If you'll grab some backpacks, we can start gathering supplies into them. Remember to grab sleeping bags. Make sure you get plenty of rain gear. According to the weather report, we could be in for a wet hike."

"What about food? How much are we going to pack in with us?"

"I think we'll probably pack two meals each, plus emergency rations. The plan is to hike in, set up camp, do an assessment of the barrier, and then decide what we'll need to do in the coming days."

"What about Agent Fastbeck? Is he going to be hiking in with us?"

"Yes. In fact, I need to call him and let him know what we're doing."

"What are the Wudewas like?" G asked curiously.

"It's really hard for me to say. I don't speak their language and I was meeting them right after some of their people had been killed. So I don't think I caught them at their best."

"Nobody said anything about anyone getting killed. Is it going to be safe?" Paul asked firmly. Agent Roberts was impressed by the young man's forceful presence.

"The people who breached their barrier were stopped. All that's left is to make sure that no one else can hurt them."

"You did that, huh? You stopped them?" G asked curiously.

"I was part of the team that did." Agent Roberts confirmed.

"I guess I'm used to thinking of witches protecting non-magical people. Even though I saw Agent Fastbeck sacrifice himself to save the people in Brynnhollow, I still feel like since we have powers that it's up to *us* to protect *them*."

"I think it comes down to who has the opportunity and the means to help people who need it. I was in the right place at the right time to help out."

"It also depends on the person, if they're willing to help or not. Just because you were there and *could* help doesn't mean that you automatically *would*." G interjected.

"That's the same with Agent Fastbeck. He didn't *have to* help. He just did it. He didn't stop to think about it or anything." Paul added.

"It sounds like you guys have a lot of respect for Agent Fastbeck."

"He gave up who he was to help a bunch of people that he barely knew. I don't know if I'd be strong enough to do that." Paul said honestly.

"I've been told that he's cursed, but that's about all I know about it."

"That's what we're talking about. He's not a normal person anymore, he probably never will be again. He accepted that fate because he knew that it would help the people in Brynnhollow."

"Is there anything that we need to know about you, Agent Roberts?" G asked cautiously.

"How do you mean?"

"Well... if they're willing to include you on this mission with us, there must be something special about you."

"As far as I know, the only thing that sets me apart from other FBI agents is that I'm already aware of the Wudewas, the Brynns and of you. Since I work for the FBI, there are things that I can do to help the group that no one else can and you don't have to worry about keeping anything hidden from me."

"Leave it to Dad to come up with a plan like this." Paul said admiringly.

"Yeah. I never would have thought about having to deal with law enforcement. All I would have been looking at was doing the magical part of the job." G added.

"I'm sure that's natural. Which probably means that your father was taught this lesson by *his* father, or that he learned the lesson the hard way." Agent Roberts said speculatively.

"And now *we're* learning the lesson by watching how he does things." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Sometimes actions speak louder than words." G said with a nod.

"Speaking of action..." Paul prompted as he turned his attention back to the rack of camping equipment.

"Right. Is there a place in the house where we can stow this stuff?" Agent Roberts asked seriously.

"Yeah. There's no problem with that. Just tell us what we'll need and we'll get started."

"Let's start by attaching your sleeping bags to the bottoms of your backpacks. Once that's done, we'll get the rest of the supplies gathered."

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"We can stack everything in here. It won't be in anyone's way. No one ever comes in here." G said as he led the way into the room.

"I don't think I've ever been in here before." Paul said uncertainly.

"You probably haven't. We don't use this room much." G said as he set down the satchel containing a tent.

"Before we let your father know about what we're still going to need, I'd like to get a look at your personal gear." Agent Roberts said as he followed suit and unburdened himself.

"Yeah. That's our next stop." G said simply, still wearing his mostly empty backpack.

"Do you think we're going to have enough rain gear for everyone?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think so. And since we're not going to be around any non-magical people, most of our party will probably be able to use spells to keep from getting rained on too much." G said thoughtfully.

"I don't know enough about magic to know what capabilities you have in that regard." Agent Roberts slowly admitted.

"This way." G said as he led the way out of the room.

"Actually, not every witch has access to the same magic. A spell that I can use might be something that G wouldn't be able to." Paul carefully explained.

"Yeah. And besides that, you have to learn the spells before you can use them. Just because you have the ability doesn't mean that you have the knowledge. It's possible that no one in our party has

ever had to worry about hiking in the rain before, so they haven't bothered to learn any 'umbrella' spells."

"Is there an 'umbrella' spell?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"There probably is, but I just know the spell that I'd use to protect me from the rain." G said honestly.

"Which spell is that?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's a basic magic spell that I learned when I was a little kid. It keeps you from getting your clothes dirty when you're playing outside, but it can also be used to repel water." G explained as they walked the maze of hallways.

"Would you mind showing it to me? I don't have anything like that." Paul asked hopefully.

"Sure. When we get to my room, I can write it down for you. It'll be a lot faster than trying to describe it."

Paul nodded as they walked.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts was surprised when they stepped through a doorway into a glassed in hallway which looked out over the vast landscape.

"Do you guys want to go on to G's room? I can grab my stuff and meet you there." Paul asked as they approached a junction in the glassed in hallway that connected to an identical parallel hallway.

"Since we've got Agent Roberts with us, it'd probably be better if he saw your stuff so he could help you choose what to bring. Hauling it all over to my room to pick and choose there doesn't make a lot of sense." G said reasonably.

"Yeah. Okay." Paul said easily, then turned to go through the connecting hallway.

Agent Roberts and G automatically followed.

* * * * *

"I'm guessing that your favorite color is blue." Agent Roberts said slowly as they walked into the bizarrely monochromatic room bathed in blue light.

"I don't know yet. I just moved in here a little while ago and I'm still deciding on a theme for it." Paul said simply.

"Right now he's testing out the 'bottom of a well' motif." G interjected.

"It's kind of relaxing." Paul said simply, then motioned to a doorway to the right before leading the way.

"So's a coma." G said under his breath.

Paul stopped in the middle of his bedroom and made a grand gesture with one arm.

As he did, the blue color dissipated and was replaced with stark white.

Agent Roberts squinted as the room seemed to become uncomfortably bright.

"How's that?" Paul asked his brother flatly.

"Keep trying." G said bluntly.

"I'll work on it when we get back. But for now, this will make it so we can see everything without having to guess at what color it is." Paul said before disappearing into a closet at the side of the room.

"Paul really *does* have a great sense of style. He just hasn't been able to pin down what suits him." G quietly explained.

"Here's my layering stuff. It's lots of cotton and wool." Paul said as he emerged from the closet carrying an armload of clothing.

"That actually looks pretty good. If you've got decent hiking boots and socks, you'll probably be in good shape... I'll need to see that you have a good coat, too."

"Yeah. I'll get that next." Paul said as he set the clothes down on his bed, then started to take off his backpack.

"Is there anything else that you think he's going to need?" G asked curiously.

"Gloves and a hat maybe. It's probably going to be cold."

"I've got those with my coat."

"Good. Then it looks like you're going to be in pretty good shape. If G is as well outfitted, then all your father should have to get is emergency rations and another tent." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"You saw the two-man tent in the storeroom didn't you?" Paul asked as he packed his clothes into his backpack.

"Yes. But with the size of our group, we're going to need another full-sized tent. Although we *might* be able to squeeze all of us into the one that we're already bringing, it would be impractical for any length of time."

"What about for sleeping? Didn't you say that there was a chance that we'd have to spend a night or two at the location?" G asked curiously.

"Yes. That *is* possible, but since we're planning on hiking out at the end of each day, we'll have the opportunity to pack in more supplies when we're aware of needing them. There's a feed store in Waxell that has everything that we'll need."

"Do you think that the locals are going to ask questions about what we're up to if we start buying a lot of camping supplies?"

"They know that I'm an FBI agent. If I tell them that it's for a case, they'll understand and know not to ask too many questions."

"Really? I think that if I knew that an FBI agent were buying camping supplies that I'd be asking more questions than ever." Paul said honestly.

"I can understand what you're saying, but I also get the feeling that the people of Waxell aren't like that. They look at their leaders and law enforcement with trust and a certain amount of admiration. Honestly, it makes me want to work that much harder to do right by them and not betray that trust."

"We only stopped there long enough to have lunch, but I thought that place was creepy." G said simply.

"It takes a little getting used to." Agent Roberts reluctantly admitted.

"I'll be right back." Paul said quietly as he hurried back into his closet.

The lull in their conversation gave Agent Roberts the opportunity to look around the teenage boy's bedroom.

While it could be said that the room was perfectly neat and clean, from another way of thinking, it was also barren. There wasn't anything ornamental on display and the walls were devoid of any decoration.

"He just moved in here." G reminded him.

Agent Roberts nodded that he had heard, but couldn't help but feel a little uneasy that Paul's personal space was more impersonal than a generic motel room.

"How's this?" Paul asked as he placed his coat, hat and gloves on the bed beside his backpack.

"Very good. Everything seems to be in excellent condition and of superior quality. I think that you'll have everything that you should need for your hiking adventure."

Paul reached down and pulled a pair of very nice, nearly new, hiking boots from under the bed before asking, "How about these?"

"As long as they're comfortable, they should be perfect."

"What about you, Agent Roberts? Are you going to have everything that you're going to need?" G asked curiously.

"Yes. I have all my hiking gear in the car. And while I wasn't planning on going hiking in the rain, it turns out that I have everything that I should need. The only thing that I'll need to add to my pack is food, which I'll pick up when we get to Waxell."

Paul finished stowing his hat and gloves, then picked up his coat and backpack.

"I've got about the same stuff as Paul, so this shouldn't take too long." G said frankly as he led the way out of the room.

"Do you remember what happened when we went camping by the lake?" Paul asked slowly, in a leading tone.

"No. What?" G asked cautiously as they walked down the glassed in hallway.

"You ended up having to borrow some of my stuff because you'd outgrown your own clothes." Paul reminded him.

"Oh, yeah. We told Dad about that, didn't we?" G asked slowly as he turned at the connection to the other glass hallway.

"I didn't tell anyone. But it's not like I minded or anything." Paul said frankly.

"Yeah. I'd better try things on to see what we'll need to buy before tomorrow." G said reluctantly.

"Your father was planning on us having to buy things tonight anyway, so I don't think it will be a problem." Agent Roberts said informatively.

"Yeah. I just hate clothes shopping." G said as he opened a door that was identical to the one on Paul's suite of rooms.

As Agent Roberts walked through the doorway, he was struck by the stark garish red. Once he had gotten past the initial shock of color, he began to recognize the theme that had been employed.

The gold embellishments as well as the vintage posters contributed to an eerie and somewhat demented early 1900's travelling carnival motif.

"Because of G's magic, this makes perfect sense." Paul said as they walked into the living area.

"What's that?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"The style of his room. It matches his magic and his personality. I'm trying to come up with something for my room that does the same thing for me." Paul carefully explained.

"So do your powers have to do with water or ice?"

G abruptly laughed at the question, then quickly restrained himself before saying, "I told you that the blue theme was the exact opposite of who you are."

"Go try on clothes." Paul said playfully as he fought to restrain a grin.

G walked to Paul and gave him a quick firm kiss, then continued on into the bedroom.

When Paul glanced back at Agent Roberts, he found him staring in surprise.

"We're a couple."

"But you're brothers..."

"Yeah. Only because our parents got married." Paul said simply, then cautiously asked, "Is that a problem?"

"No. I guess I just wasn't expecting it. I've been thinking of you two as brothers, so that kind of caught me off guard."

"I guess that makes sense." Paul said without concern, then asked, "So, do you have a lot of other stuff planned for tonight besides the last minute shopping?"

"I still need to make a phone call. As far as I know, your father has taken care of everything else."

"Then maybe after the shopping's done, you could hang out with us out here. We could watch a movie or something."

"We'll just have to wait and see how things go. Your dad might come up with more for us to do between now and then."

"Yeah. But if he doesn't, think about hanging with us." Paul was saying as G walked into the living room carrying a stack of clothes.

Agent Roberts was surprised that instead of the school uniform, G was now wearing only a pair of blue jeans. He was bare chested and barefoot.

"These all fit but I'm not sure if they'll be enough." G said as he placed the clothing in a stack on one of the couches.

Agent Roberts walked to the couch and began to look through them critically.

"Actually, I think this is just about right. It looks like you'll have everything that you're likely to need."

"I left my backpack in the other room." G said before hurrying away.

"I didn't think about changing when we were in my room. Would you mind if I left you here on your own for a minute?" Paul asked hopefully.

"No problem." Agent Roberts responded, then watched as Paul hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Where'd Paul go?" G asked as he walked into the living room carrying his backpack and coat.

"Back to his room to change. He said that he'd be right back."

"He could've borrowed something of mine. We're the same size." G said as he began packing his clothing into his backpack.

"Do you have any questions or concerns about what we're going to be doing?"

"Not really. I mean, ever since I saw the Brynnhollow barrier, I've been interested in how they got it to work. So I'm kind of excited about that. I guess if there's anything that I'm nervous about, it'd be about meeting the Wudewas. As far as I knew they were creatures that didn't exist in this realm... at least, not anymore."

"I really don't know anything about how they came to be here or about other realms. But I can tell you without a doubt that they *do* exist in the here and now."

"They teach us about all kinds of things like that at school, but they like to be really vague and tell us just as much as we absolutely *need* to know."

"Considering the veil of secrecy that you live under, I'm sure that they're just doing their best to protect everyone involved."

"Probably..."

"What'd I miss?" Paul asked as he walked back into the room, now dressed in casual clothes.

"*Boys, wrap up what you're doing. The Mulryans are here.*" Beth's voice called over the intercom.

"If we've done everything that we need to here, we should get back to the house." G said as he finished gathering his things into his backpack.

"Do you have your hiking boots?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked down at G's bare feet.

"I will in just a minute. Be right back." G said as he dashed back into his bedroom.

"Any last minute questions or concerns?" Agent Roberts asked Paul quietly.

"There's one little thing that I'm worried about." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"What's that?"

"If I'm understanding what we're going to be doing, everything's going to be based in natural magic."

"I really don't know anything about that."

Paul nodded, then continued, "At school, I'm always doing big flashy things. G says that I do little spells in a big way. The thing is, even though I can do natural magic, it's not what I'm best at. I don't want to disappoint anyone."

"I can't do any magic at all. So no matter what you do, it's got to be more than what I can do." Agent Roberts said frankly.

Paul let out a small ironic chuckle, then asked, "You don't understand what's so special about regular humans, do you?"

"No. I didn't think that there *was* anything special."

"Magic is a harness that we wear. Although we control it, it also controls us. We're limited in what we *can* do and what we *will* do because of it. You're the jokers, you're the wildcards."

"I don't understand." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"I was raised human, so I've seen the other side of things. I don't know if I can really explain it, but since you're going to be spending a few days traveling with witches, keep your eyes open and I think you'll begin to notice it."

"Did he tell you about Dex's family?" G asked as he emerged from his bedroom, fully dressed.

"No. What about them?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Dex's father is non-magical and I guess it makes things uncomfortable around their house, so they're used to avoiding the subject. I just wanted to be sure you knew that in case things get tense at the dinner table." G said as he picked up his backpack and coat, then gestured toward the door to the hallway.

"How are we going to talk about Dex going on the work study without talking about magic?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously as he walked with the boys out of G's room.

"Let Dad handle that part. I'm sure he already knows what he's going to say." G said with a grin.

"So a non-magical person and a magical person can have kids together?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"Yeah. We studied about that in health class. I think that there's eight major species that can interbreed... at least on this plane of reality. There are some others that they just mention in passing and don't count because they don't exist here." Paul said thoughtfully.

"And there are some of those species that can breed with some but not others." G interjected.

"Right. A demon and an angel couldn't produce offspring together... in fact, they probably wouldn't survive it if they tried." Paul said frankly.

"So things like angels and demons really exist?"

"Yeah. If you remind me later, I'll introduce you to some demons."

"Thanks, but I think I'll pass."

"Now that you've actually met some witches, have they turned out to be everything that you expected them to be?"

"No. I have to admit that they haven't."

"Then can you at least *try* to accept that everything that you've heard about demons might not be *entirely* true?" Paul asked hopefully.

"I suppose that I could do that."

"Thank you. If you'll be open to it even that much, I'm sure that you won't have any problem with my friends."

* * * * *

After the boys had dropped off their loaded backpacks and sleeping bags, G led the way to the parlor, where their guests were being greeted.

"I'm glad that you know where you're going because I have the feeling that we're walking in circles." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I'm the same way." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"For some reason Paul's always getting turned around in here." G confirmed.

"So I shouldn't expect for it to get better?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"It never has for me." Paul said honestly.

* * * * *

As the trio walked into the parlor, Mr. Darroch happily said, "Jai and Pam, may I present our other guest, Agent Shawn Roberts from the FBI."

"FBI?" Jai asked with surprise.

"That's right." Mr. Darroch confirmed, then turned to Agent Roberts and said, "Shawn, may I present Jai and Pam Mulryan and their son Dex, whom I believe you met earlier."

"We were both introduced to the group, but I don't think we spoke to each other directly." Agent Roberts said to Mr. Darroch, then turned to Dex and said, "It's nice to see you again, Dex."

"Thank you." Dex said timidly.

"So does this work study thing that they're going to do have something to do with the FBI?" Jai asked anxiously.

"Not directly." Mr. Darroch said carefully, then explained, "We've asked for the FBI to assist us to prevent any possibility of trouble with the local authorities. While the teachers present will work to protect the students from any magical hazards, Agent Roberts will be there to deal with the mundane."

"So he's not a..." Jai trailed off, obviously not wanting to say the word aloud.

"That's right. Agent Roberts is a non-magical person who will be one of the leaders of the expedition." Mr. Darroch confirmed.

Jai looked Agent Roberts in the eyes and said, "No one's told me what they're planning on doing or why they want Dex to go, but *you're* okay with what they're planning?"

"Yes." Agent Roberts said simply.

"If everyone's ready, why don't we go on in to dinner and we can discuss just what the mission is and Dex's part in it, should he be allowed to participate." Mr. Darroch asked hopefully.

Agent Roberts noticed that Pam seemed to gravitate to Beth and the baby. Mr. Darroch was flanked on either side by his sons. That left him to walk with Mr. Mulryan and Dex.

"Do you really think that Dex will be alright if he goes?" Mr. Mulryan asked quietly.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know exactly what it is that they're going to ask Dex to do. Because of that, I can't really speak to the danger involved." Agent Roberts said honestly.

After a moment for that to sink in, he added, "But I know about *where* they'll be going and *why*. Not only can I tell you that it's a worthwhile pursuit, but I can promise you that I intend to make it my personal responsibility to be sure that *all* the members of our party return home safely."

"Do you know why they're wanting to include Dex?" Jai asked as he stopped just outside the dining room door.

Dex stopped with them and was listening with interest.

"As I said, I don't know what they're going to ask Dex to do. But I got the feeling that it's something big and important and something that only he can do because of who and what he is."

"They need an Oriad?" Dex asked quietly.

"Yes. That's the impression that I got." Agent Roberts confirmed.

"Let's go in and see what D has to say about it." Jai told his son gently, then quietly added, "If you decide that you want to do it, I won't stand in your way."

Dex pulled his father into a quick firm hug.

Agent Roberts smiled at the scene, then followed the father and son into the dining room.

Chapter 15

"D was just telling us that they're going shopping for some last minute items for the work study project." Pam told her husband as Agent Roberts, Jai and Dex walked into the dining room.

"That's right." Mr. Darroch confirmed, then added, "As soon as we know what additional supplies we'll be needing."

"We have most of what we're going to need, both for the boys and for the group as a whole." Agent Roberts said as he took a seat at the table beside Paul.

"Is this something that you can purchase in Waxell in the morning after you arrive, or do you need to get it tonight?" Mr. Darroch asked curiously.

"I would prefer to get what we can before we leave and use Waxell as a fallback plan for whatever I failed to anticipate."

"How much carrying capacity do you think you'll be needing for your shopping trip tonight?"

"Not much at all. I'd like to pick up another tent, some water flasks and a few supplemental clothing items for the boys... and maybe some extra rain gear."

"Do you think that you'd be able to manage that with your car?"

"Sure. No problem."

"Then the boys can go with you to help you carry things and they can pay for your purchases."

Agent Roberts nodded his agreement to the arrangement.

"Can you tell us some more about this 'Work Study' project?" Jai asked abruptly.

"What would you like to know?" Mr. Darroch asked calmly.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but admire Mr. Darroch's ability to remain calm and maintain absolute control of all the various situations at once.

"Where are you wanting to take Dex?" Jai asked anxiously.

"I don't know how aware you are of certain things, so let me begin by saying that sometimes it's necessary for a group of people to keep themselves hidden from the rest of the world. Those of us who have the ability to do so, work to keep their secrets and give them the best possible quality of life as they remain separate. One such group of people has been discovered and threatened by the outer world."

"By normal humans, you mean?" Jai asked cautiously.

"Yes. But not just that. They were discovered by some evil people who would have enslaved, exploited and killed them for their own enrichment. Fortunately, Agent Roberts and his partner were present to take matters in hand and see that the situation was resolved so that the vulnerable people were protected and their secret was kept safe."

"And you're a human, right?" Jai asked Agent Roberts, to confirm that point.

"Yes, but from what I've seen, *what* you are doesn't matter nearly as much as *who* you are. I helped people in trouble when they needed it." Agent Roberts said seriously.

Mr. Mulryan turned his attention back to Mr. Darroch and quietly asked, "And you want Dex to help people who are in need?"

"Agent Roberts helped to eliminate the immediate threat. We're asking Dex to be part of a team that will help ensure that those vulnerable people will be able to remain hidden within their sanctuary, safe from the outside world."

"But you can't tell us who we'll be helping?" Dex timidly asked.

"The members of the team will know who they will be helping but we're going to do our best not to discuss it outside the group. The fewer people brought in on this, the better for those we're trying to protect."

"It's not faeries." G stated firmly.

Mr. Darroch quirked an eyebrow as he slowly turned his attention toward his son.

"So if we just call it 'The Faerie Colony', we'll all know what we're talking about even though we all know that that's not what it really is." G explained.

After a long moment of silence, Jai finally said, "Actually, I think that helps."

Mr. Darroch looked at him with surprise.

"A community of faeries being discovered and endangered is something that I can visualize." Jai said thoughtfully.

"Do you know what I'd have to do if I went along?" Dex asked timidly from his father's side.

At that question, Agent Roberts was certain that everything had been decided. Given Dex's timidity, he wouldn't have spoken unless he had already committed himself to the idea of participating. Everything from this point on was window dressing to reassure him that he had made the right decision.

"Professor Everstone is in charge of the project, so he knows the details of what you will be doing. But based on my limited understanding of such things, the only way to make an enduring barrier to protect... 'The Faerie Colony'... is to tie it into the earth element. Only a Nature Mage can effectively manipulate that type of magic and even then, it can be incredibly difficult."

"I'm not a Nature Mage." Dex said regretfully.

"No. That's why we're bringing Zanner Sands along." Mr. Darroch confirmed, then continued, "But since you're an Oriad, you were born with a magical connection to the earth element. As I understand the fundamentals of Natural Magic, the earth element is so vast that it's nearly impossible to manipulate. Even when you try to use Thaumaturgical principles to manipulate an embodiment of the earth element to gain access to that power, the talisman that you need to use ends up being enormous and hopelessly unstable."

"So you want to use my access to the Earth Element to fuel the barrier that's going to protect 'The Faerie Colony'?" Dex asked to confirm.

"That's right. You can unlock the power so that Zanner can access it. Then the rest of the team can call upon that power and manipulate it to recreate the barrier to protect the inhabitants." Mr. Darroch confirmed.

"I don't know if you've thought about this, but what about modern technology, like satellite surveillance and GPS and all of that?" Paul asked slowly.

"That hasn't been mentioned, but I would imagine that it's probably a standard part of any barrier being used in the current age." Mr. Darroch said honestly.

"I need to email Mr. Plaven and see if he's got anything that we're going to need to include." Paul said thoughtfully.

"I hadn't considered that, but he *is* on the cutting edge of techno-magic. He may know of something that should be included that we haven't heard about."

"Do you need to stay behind to do that?" G asked his brother cautiously.

"No. I can do it on my phone." Paul said simply.

G nodded his acceptance.

"Mom? Would you mind if I went?" Dex asked his mother quietly.

"I won't mind as long as you tell me all about it when you get back." His mother said with an indulgent smile at her son.

"Dad?" Dex asked anxiously.

"It's up to you, Dex. I can't decide this for you." Jai said as he looked his son in the eyes, then quietly continued, "But how often do you have the opportunity to do something that really matters?"

Dex hugged his father from the side, then turned to Mr. Darroch and cautiously said, "I'll do it."

"Good." Mr. Darroch said with a smile, then added more seriously, "Do you think that you'll have everything that you'll be needing for the hike to the location?"

"Yeah. I think so." Dex said uncertainly.

"According to the weather forecast, we should expect rain, so you should also be prepared for that." Mr. Darroch warned.

"Rain is good. That's no problem for me."

"Even so, you might want to get with Agent Roberts about the list of needed supplies that he came up with. In fact, if you wanted to, you could probably even go to the store with him and get his help picking things out." Mr. Darroch suggested.

Although Agent Roberts would normally balk at being volunteered for any such endeavour, he was able to look past his natural inclination and acknowledge the practicality of it.

"If no one would mind, I'd really like to take a long look at some of Beth and Kyla's new designs." Pam announced, then looked to her husband and son before continuing, "I could be doing that while you boys are out gathering the supplies that Dex is going to need."

"What do you think about that, Dex?" His father asked him hopefully.

"Yeah. Okay." Dex said with a quick but sincere smile.

Agent Roberts got the sense that Dex didn't smile often and that he had just been witness to a rare and special thing.

* * * * *

After finishing their meal, Agent Roberts was happy to find that Mr. Mulryan and the boys were enthusiastic about their shopping trip.

Since Mr. Mulryan was familiar with the area, Agent Roberts followed his car with Paul and G riding along with him.

"So Agent Roberts, is this weird for you or what?" Paul asked curiously.

"How do you mean?"

"Like I said, I was raised as a normal person. I can imagine that it must be strange for you to realize that you're driving witches to the store for camping equipment."

"Well, when you put it that way, I suppose that it *is* a little strange, but I don't think of you as witches, I look at you guys as my teammates. Even though I know that you could probably do some freaky magical things to me if you wanted to, I also know that you're reasonable people who wouldn't attack an innocent person without reason."

"So do you look at being a witch the same as being a normal person?"

"Sure, in some ways... I guess in all the most important ways. But at the same time I recognize that we're different in some ways too. You have a secret to hide that I don't. You have the responsibility and burden of magical powers that I can't even imagine having to deal with."

"You know, most witches don't know about that." Paul said frankly.

"How's that?"

"They're born with it and grow up around it. It's not a burden to them. It's just a fact of life."

"I suppose it's the same as me being black. Even though I can imagine what it's like to be something else, I can only be who I am."

"I was surprised when I found out that there were witches of all races. I mean, with us being a whole other species, I'd think that we'd all be pretty much the same." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Since witches and humans can interbreed, it makes sense that we'd have racial diversity." G said informatively.

"But doesn't the combination of a witch and a human result in a warlock?" Paul asked thoughtfully.

"That's true most of the time, but it doesn't always work out that way. Sometimes the kids will turn out as full witches and others will end up being completely human." G explained.

"So what about Dex? How did he end up being an Oriad?" Paul asked curiously.

"That's one of those things that sometimes happens. It could have happened to a pair of witches just as easily." G said thoughtfully.

"I don't understand how that works." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Neither does anyone else. It's magic. You just have to accept it." G said simply.

"While I can accept that there are things that I don't understand, that doesn't mean that I'm going to stop asking questions."

"I thought it was just me." Paul said under his breath.

"What's that?"

"I'm the same way. I want to know how all the different magic works and why. Understanding the fundamentals makes it so that I can try new things." Paul said earnestly.

"You said that you were raised as a human. How did that happen?"

"I'm kind of like Dex, since my dad isn't a witch. My mom couldn't be sure if I'd have any magic at all, so she waited until my magic manifested before letting me know anything about witches."

"But you were chosen for this project, so that must mean that you're pretty powerful."

"I'm about average, I think. But when I got my magic, it was all at once. I didn't know how to use it or what to do with it. Me doing simple spells, really powerfully must have impressed some people."

"That, along with you insisting to be taught advanced alchemy. *That* caught some people's attention." G added.

"I guess so. But all I wanted to do was understand magic at the most basic level. If I couldn't get that, then all I'd be doing is using other people's spells without knowing what I was *actually* doing..."

"...Like what everyone else does." G supplied with a grin.

"I'm not everyone else. For me, the only way I can make it work is to understand how all the parts fit together."

"It looks like we're here." Agent Roberts said as he followed Jai's car into a parking lot.

"Remember, no magic talk around the regular people." Paul warned.

"Yeah. When we get to talking, it's easy to forget." G agreed.

"Don't worry about me. The FBI is all about discretion."

* * * * *

The trip through the sporting goods store was productive. Everyone remained focused on their objective and were appreciative for Agent Roberts' help in gathering everything that they were likely to need.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but notice how Dex appeared to stay glued to his father's side throughout their shopping expedition.

Even though Paul and G invited Dex to join them in looking at things, their offers were nothing more than a courtesy. Agent Roberts could clearly see that they weren't expecting Dex to accept.

"So, do we have everything that we're going to need for tomorrow?" Paul asked as they left the store.

"I think that we have everything that we're going to need to buy. But I'm guessing that you guys will probably want to pack a suitcase each for while you're staying at my house."

"Oh yeah. I didn't think about that." Paul said thoughtfully as G quickly asked, "Do you think we'll get to eat at The Waxell Diner? Their food was great!"

"We'll just have to wait and see how things play out. By all indications, we should have time to stop for something before we leave for our hike."

"Awesome!" G said happily.

* * * * *

Once they were back at Mr. Darroch's house, G took charge of getting their new clothes washed and ready for use the following morning.

Agent Roberts spoke briefly with Mr. Darroch about the travel arrangements and any new developments. Everything seemed to be going according to plan and everyone had responded, saying that they would meet at the airport at the appointed time and place.

After inspecting their equipment one last time, G announced that they were going to watch television before bed.

Although Agent Roberts wouldn't normally participate in such a thing, he went along with it willingly and was surprised to find that he enjoyed the whimsical fantasy cartoons.

* * * * *

"*Boys? Did you abduct the nice FBI agent? He's not answering the call to his room.*" Beth's voice asked over the intercom.

"Yeah! We've got him." Paul answered into the air.

"Sor-ry." G called after him.

"*You three come to the dining room and have breakfast. You'll still have time to get ready for the airport once you've finished eating.*"

"We'll be right there!" Paul said as he extracted himself from the blankets on the couch.

"Sorry about not getting you back to your room last night. I hope you got enough sleep." G said repentantly.

"No worries. I slept just fine. Thanks for inviting me." Agent Roberts said as he worked to straighten his sleep rumpled clothes.

"It was fun. I love inviting new people to watch anime with us. It's like seeing them for the first time, all over again." G said happily.

"Let me hit the bathroom and I'll be ready." Paul said as he hurried out of the room.

"Oh yeah. I need to go too." G said as he followed more slowly.

Although Agent Roberts didn't want to admit it, he also needed to go.

When he arrived at the bathroom, he waited with G outside the bathroom door.

"I'm glad that you stayed with us out here last night. I think it's good for Paul to be around regular adults." G said quietly.

"I didn't do anything but watch anime with you."

"Just being here was enough..." G said as Paul walked out of the bathroom.

G hurried into the bathroom .

"How are you doing Paul? Are you excited about what we're going to be doing?"

"Actually, I'm a little nervous. I don't want to disappoint anyone."

"Part of the reason you're going along is to learn new things. Trust in your teachers to guide you to let you know what is expected and to warn you if you're doing something dangerous."

"You're up!" G said as he stepped out through the doorway.

"You'll be fine." Agent Roberts assured Paul before going into the bathroom.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts felt a bit disoriented as the trio walked into the dining room. He was more than half sure that the dining room wasn't in the same place that it had been the night before.

"I hope everyone got a good night of sleep. I just finished checking and everything seems to be going according to plan." D announced.

"What about the relics? Were you able to gather everything you needed?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yes. Professor Everstone will be bringing one with him. The other will be brought by Mr. Brown from the Smithsonian."

"Do you know where and when we're supposed to meet him?"

"He's planning to meet you at the baggage claim at the airport in Kentucky, since he's due to arrive right before you."

"That might not be so bad."

"I wouldn't count on that. He's already got one strike against him for being such an intransigent twat."

"Who are we talking about?" Paul asked curiously.

"Charles Bentley Brown. He's bringing a necessary relic for the barrier reconstruction."

"And he's a twat?" G asked cautiously.

"Yes. He is."

"D, that's not a very nice thing to say in front of the boys." Beth scolded.

"Maybe not, but they would have figured it out for themselves eventually." Mr. Darroch said unrepentantly.

"Will we be renting cars at the airport?" Agent Roberts asked thoughtfully.

"I made reservations for all the adults except you. I assumed that you had made your own arrangements."

"I called Agent Fastbeck last night. He said that he'd pick me up at the airport."

"Good. That should also work well for the next leg of your journey. On the drive back to Waxell you'll have a chance to bring Conrad up-to-date."

"All you're expecting Agent Fastbeck to do is explain to the Wudewas what we're planning to do, right?"

"Yes. Since he's the only one who can speak their language, it's the only responsible course of action."

"Couldn't we use a translation spell for that if we needed to?" Paul asked his father curiously.

"Not in this case. As I understand it, the Wudewas language is highly contextual and fluid. A 'dictionary' would be out-of-date before it was even written."

"So how can Agent Fastbeck do it then?"

"It would probably be best if you asked him about that yourself."

"You don't know?"

"I know as much as I need to know."

"Remember, boys, you're going to be around regular people for a few days. Be very careful about using magic, even when you think you're alone." Beth warned.

"We go to school with regular people every day. It's not like we're not used to it." G said frankly.

"But at school, you have safeguards in place. There's an enchantment on the school grounds to discourage people from noticing unusual occurrences." Mr. Darroch said seriously.

"There is?" G asked with surprise.

"The main enchantment is housed in a wall in the gym." Paul confirmed. "The thing's too big and complicated for me to understand it all, but it looks to me like it just makes you see what you expect to see."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" G asked curiously.

"To be honest, I didn't think too much about it. I mean, it makes sense to have something like that around when you're going to have witches and regular people together."

"Can we get something like that so people won't be as likely to notice if we slip up?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"I don't think you'll have anyone on the team who wields that type of magic." Mr. Darroch said thoughtfully.

"Besides that, mind manipulation magic is really hard to control. It usually ends up causing more problems than it solves." Paul said frankly.

"Yeah. Like with Carla." G responded casually.

The glare that G received from his brother was epic.

Agent Roberts looked from one to the other, hoping that someone would explain.

It was Paul who finally turned to Agent Roberts and said, "Carla was a girl in my class who used an empathy enchantment on the people around her to make them like her and want to do whatever she said."

"Until she met Paul." G interjected with a grin.

"I was new at the school and worried that someone might try to attack me magically, so I cast a protection spell on myself to repel any attack against me back to the person who cast it."

"So Carla's obsession spell backfired on her, times three." G said gloriously.

"According to what Doctor Williams said, she didn't even know she was casting a spell. It kind of happened subconsciously, or something." Paul explained.

"Yeah. But then they had to do, like, this whole magical 'hazmat' response thing because of her. They had to find everyone that she'd put a spell on and release them from it."

"From what I hear, there were a few of her closest friends that had been under her spell for years."

"Carla is getting special training now, to learn how to control her empathic magic and keep it from getting away."

"If there's any good news in all of this, she seems to have cut back on the makeup a little. I swear, there were days when she almost looked like a sculpture."

"Maybe now that people will tell her what they honestly think about things instead of just what she wants to hear, she'll hear some truth about herself."

"After how horrible she was to so many people, she somehow got to play the 'victim card' and have people feeling sorry for her. I still don't get how that works." Paul said frankly.

"People make mistakes... especially young people. You forgive. You move on." Mr. Darroch said sagely.

"Then what's the point of working hard and trying to do your best?" Paul asked confusedly.

"Although I might forgive someone like Carla, it would take a lot for me to be able to trust her. Someone who has worked hard and proven themselves to be trustworthy in my eyes might be seen as responsible enough to be allowed to go on a special mission away from the school... and away from my direct supervision." Mr. Darroch said carefully.

Both boys slowly nodded that they were listening and understood what their father was saying.

"Both of you have birthdays approaching. I think that when you get back, it might be a good idea for two hardworking and responsible young men to start looking at what kinds of cars they might like to have someday soon." Mr. Darroch finished with a smile.

"You're going to get us cars for our birthdays?!" G exploded happily.

"Shhh! Don't wake the baby." Beth said in a harsh whisper as she verified that the baby beside her was still sleeping.

"Let's just say that I'm very proud that the two of you have been chosen to participate in the barrier project. You were chosen over students who were older and more experienced than yourselves. That suggests to me that you may be ready to take on even greater responsibilities."

"Wait. How can you make getting a car sound like it's going to be a bad thing?" Paul asked slowly.

"We'll talk about it when you get back. Right this minute you need to get your showers and pack up your last few personal items. Time

is ticking away and the plane isn't going to wait for you." Mr. Darroch said seriously.

Both boys hurried to finish the last few bites of their breakfasts as Agent Roberts cautiously asked, "Will I be taking the boys to the airport or will you be driving them?"

"We'll be going to see them off. In fact, I've already loaded my car with all the equipment that you had stored in the West sitting room, so you should only have to contend with the luggage you brought with you." Mr. Darroch said informatively.

"That *will* be helpful." Agent Roberts said as he placed his napkin on his empty plate.

"We'll probably need to hire a cart to carry everything at the airport, but otherwise we shouldn't have to concern ourselves too much with the extra equipment."

"Come on, Agent Roberts, I'll show you where your room is." G said as he bounded up from his chair.

"Thank you." Agent Roberts said sincerely, not wanting to admit that he probably wouldn't be able to find it on his own.

"Where do you want us to meet when we're ready?" Paul asked his father as he stood more slowly.

"Let's meet in the parlor. We can go to the cars from there."

"Got it." Paul assured him as he joined G and Agent Roberts walking toward the dining room door.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts appreciated the chance to clean up and have a little time to himself to get his thoughts in order.

While it was true that he had once again found himself in an incomprehensible situation, he was strangely at peace with it.

The only way he could explain his calm acceptance was to admit his trust in Mr. Darroch's diligent planning and overall good will.

Having participated in the preparations, Agent Roberts knew how many different factors Mr. Darroch was juggling to bring everything together. In the end, he couldn't find fault with any of the decisions made.

That in itself was quite a feat, since Agent Roberts tended to over-analyze decisions and second-guess authority.

But in regard to Mr. Darroch's good will... Agent Roberts respected Mr. Darroch's concern for others and how he balanced that against his desire to protect his children.

All in all, Agent Roberts felt proud to be included on the team and held a desire to see their endeavor through to its conclusion and make it a success.

* * * * *

After getting cleaned up, Agent Roberts gathered his things and carried his suitcase to the parlor, where he found the others waiting.

Little was said as the group went to the cars.

Agent Roberts found himself driving to the airport alone, following Mr. Darroch and his family.

He couldn't help but admit that he wouldn't have it any other way.

While the boys seemed capable of being independent, Agent Roberts could see how much they benefited from every minute that they spent with their father.

His own father was a driven man, focusing on his career to the exclusion of all else. While Agent Roberts never felt that he and his sister were *neglected*, he couldn't help but be a little envious witnessing the relationship that Mr. Darroch had with his sons.

By the time he reached the airport, Agent Roberts had come to the conclusion that his father wasn't a *bad* man; perhaps not even that bad of a father. His mother was a relentless taskmaster, never allowing the pressure to ease for even a moment. But his father mostly just kept food on the table and a roof over their heads.

If any fault could be found in his father's parenting at all, it would be that he didn't make his children a priority. Work came first, then came other responsibilities. By all appearances, Shawn and Michelle were left to be 'handled' by their mother. As far as their father was concerned, they were little more than annoyances to be dealt with as time permitted.

* * * * *

When they arrived at the airport, Agent Roberts was surprised to see just how efficiently Mr. Darroch managed things. Within a minute of their arrival, Mr. Darroch had already made all the arrangements for their 'cargo'.

After that, the group strolled into the airport where they soon met up with the other members of their traveling party.

Agent Roberts had intended to stand back and watch the various families saying goodbye to each other. However, Jai and Pam seemingly had other plans. They gravitated to Agent Roberts and included him in their farewell.

It was a bittersweet goodbye and Agent Roberts felt his protective feelings for Dex rise up as he saw how difficult it was for him to separate from his parents.

* * * * *

All too soon it was time for them to make their way through security so that they could board their flight.

As Agent Roberts left the checkpoint, a man in a nondescript suit walked up beside him and quietly asked, "Agent Roberts?"

"Yes." Shawn confirmed as he went on alert.

"I'm Sky Marshal Butler. I'll be on your flight this morning." The man said in a carefully controlled voice, then added, "I like to introduce myself to the members of law enforcement before we take off, so in the event of unforeseen circumstances, we all know who we can count on."

"Are you expecting trouble?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I'm *always* expecting trouble. That's my job." Sky Marshal Butler said frankly, then continued, "But so far there hasn't been any indication that this will be anything other than a routine flight."

"Good." Agent Roberts said with relief, then thought to add, "If things go south, you can count on me."

"That's what I was hoping." Sky Marshal Butler said simply, then casually walked away.

Chapter 16

The boarding process was as routine as it could be.

When they went to their assigned seats, Agent Roberts was once again surprised at Mr. Darroch's subtle, yet thoughtful, planning.

He found that Dex had been assigned a middle seat in the row, between himself and Professor Everstone. In the row behind them, Miss Oaken and Corabeth were talking quietly.

Filipe, Paul and G were in the next row and the last of their group, Mr. Hansen and Zanner, were in the row immediately following.

Agent Roberts could easily see how the personalities of the people and their relationships with each other had been taken into account while making the seating arrangements.

"Can I ask you something, Agent Roberts?" Dex asked quietly.

"Sure. Go ahead."

"What's it like to live as a human? What's it like to grow up not believing in magic?"

"The people who say that ignorance is bliss may actually be onto something."

"Really?"

"No. I suppose not. But looking back, everything seemed so much simpler back then. All the rules were clearly defined and the world seemed to make perfect sense."

"That sounds nice."

"While I was living that way, it wasn't a bad way to be. But now I look back and everything seems so small and limited. It's like I was living in a bubble, sheltered from an enormous amazing world that I didn't even know was there."

"So do you think that knowing is better?" Dex asked uncertainly.

"I suppose that depends on what your objective is. Knowing the truth changes how you view the world around you. I was used to thinking of everyone being the same, having the same abilities and limitations. The only thing that made them different was their motivations and decisions. People who had nefarious motivations and those who made self-serving choices needed to be stopped for the betterment of society as a whole."

"Stopping people like that sounds like it would be a hard thing to do, but it also sounds like something that you could be proud of doing." Dex said thoughtfully.

"I felt like I was making a difference. Regardless of how effective my efforts were, the job I was doing contributed to making the world a better place."

"But you don't feel that way now?"

"I do, but it's not the same. There's so much going on that I wasn't aware of before, that I'm having to reevaluate my place in the grand scheme of things."

"Are you thinking of quitting the FBI?"

"No. But before I learned the truth, everything that was right and wrong was spelled out very precisely for me. When I faced a situation, there was no moral quandary. Stop the bad guy, help the good guy... it was all pretty simple. Now I have to look at a situation and consider if there may be magic at play or if an opponent may be motivated by trying to protect his people from being discovered."

"So you're trying to figure out how to do your job knowing that there are witches in the world who may be working against you?" Dex asked cautiously.

"Yes, to some degree. What was black and white before now has shades of gray that I never could have imagined. I guess that I'm a

little overwhelmed trying to determine my place in the bigger world. Being a human, I'm at a disadvantage when dealing with beings of power, or in the case of the Wudewas, great size and physical strength."

"Wudewas?"

"Yes. You'll be hearing all about them when we arrive in Kentucky. That's who we're going to be helping."

"I remember studying about them in my Health and Healing class, but I didn't think that there were any on this plane of existence."

"There's at least a colony of them, because I've been there."

"And we're going there to protect them from being discovered by humans?"

"Yes. Some people with advanced technological gadgetry were able to detect the Wudewas village and penetrate it with remote controlled drones. They were even able to kill a few of the Wudewas, although they didn't know who it was that they were killing."

"And you stopped them?"

"I was part of the team that stopped them. To tell you the truth, my biggest contribution to the whole thing was that I knew people with the skills to be able to help."

Dex thought about that for a moment, then quietly asked, "If you hadn't been there, what do you think would have happened?"

"Agent Fastbeck, that's my boss, he probably would have found another way to deal with it. I think the solution we were able to come up with was a lot cleaner and less troublesome than it might have been otherwise. But if I hadn't been there, I still think that he would have been able to manage."

"It sounds to me like your 'human' way of thinking might be the strength that you're bringing to the table. When witches have a

problem, they usually think of what magic they can use to solve it. Since you grew up without magic, you think of other answers to the same problem, then decide which answer is best."

"I hadn't really thought about it in those terms, but I can see what you're saying." Agent Roberts said slowly, then thought to ask, "What about you? How are you different from a witch or a human?"

Dex seemed surprised by the question, but before he could answer, they could feel the plane accelerating for takeoff.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts was surprised by the force of the grip on his hand.

Dex hadn't shown any indication of being afraid, or at least no more afraid than was usual for him. But as the plane began to rise into the air, Agent Roberts could tell that the boy was nothing less than completely terrified.

"It's okay. It's going to be fine." Agent Roberts quietly assured the frightened boy.

"Agent Roberts, there's something you need to know about me." Dex said past clenched teeth.

"Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"I'm not a witch. I can't cast a spell or do any of the other things that witches usually do. In fact, most magic doesn't work on me."

"That doesn't sound like a bad thing to me." Agent Roberts said gently.

"But I'm not a human either. I'm an Oriad. I'm an avatar of the earth."

"I don't know what that means." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I'm part of the earth and it's part of me." Dex stated simply, then explained, "If I'm not really careful all the time, the earth will react to what I'm feeling."

"Oh. That doesn't sound good."

"Actually, if I get too scared and totally lose it, the earth might try to rise up to meet us."

"Like a mountain might suddenly spring up out of nowhere?"

"Yes. Well, probably a volcano, but if that doesn't work, then it could just end up being a massive explosion."

"But wouldn't that hurt you rather than helping you?"

"The earth isn't known for thinking things through. It's mostly about action and reaction."

"So you need to stay calm at all times to keep the earth from reacting to you?"

"Not all the time, but there's always the danger that if something bad happened to me, the earth could react to it."

"So that explains why you don't see yourself as being like a human."

"I go to school with witches who can do all kinds of incredible things and I'm not a part of any of that. I also go to school with humans who can let loose of what they're feeling if they want to and scream or fight or just sing with joy. I can't be a part of that either."

"And if you ever did that, the earth might react to whatever you were feeling." Agent Roberts added, to confirm his understanding.

"I don't have any magic of my own, but if I need to, I can call upon the magic of the earth... *the entire planet earth*."

After a momentary pause, Agent Roberts quietly said, "We've leveled off. Are you better now?"

"Not completely. I can feel how far we are from the ground, but I can manage this. The hardest part was the feeling of being torn away from the earth's embrace. Even though I can feel the distance, I can still feel the connection, too."

"I think that there are a lot of people who don't care for the sensation of taking off. You did just fine."

Dex released Agent Roberts' hand, then said, "Thank you for talking to me while it was happening. It helped."

"The vast majority of humans don't have any idea of what's really going on in the world, so I'm well outside the norm. From what you've told me, you're well outside the norm too. Even though we're not the same in every way, we've got that much in common."

"I'm not used to feeling like I have anything in common with anyone." Dex said quietly.

"Hey! Me too!" Agent Roberts said with a grin.

Dex looked at him strangely for a moment, then broke into an unwilling smile.

* * * * *

There was a long silence as Agent Roberts and Dex contemplated what might lay ahead of them in the coming days.

"I'm glad you're going to be part of our team. I think you're going to be able to make a significant contribution." Professor Everstone said to Dex quietly.

Dex stared at him with surprise for a moment, then slowly responded, "Thank you sir."

"I don't know if you realize just how much of a contribution you'll be making."

"I'm going to give you access to the earth element, but if I weren't going to be there, you would just access it another way."

"I have had the opportunity to reconstruct other barriers over the years. In those cases, the most dangerous and time consuming part of the process was establishing a sufficient connection with the earth."

"So me being there will really help?"

"Your participation in this project will make our chances of success much greater. Establishing a barrier on a massive scale can be fraught with many dangers."

"How dangerous is it going to be?" Dex asked quietly.

Agent Roberts leaned a little closer to hear Professor Everstone's response.

"While the magic itself holds dangers for all of us, I believe the greater concern for you will be the possibility of becoming lost, either within the barrier or within the earth itself."

"What does that mean *exactly*?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

Professor Everstone shifted his gaze to Agent Roberts and carefully said, "Dexter will be serving as a conduit for an enormous amount of power. It is *possible* that the flow of so much magic will, in essence, wash Dexter away. His physical being could possibly dissolve and become part of either the barrier or of the earth."

"If that happens, how hard will it be to get him back?"

"Once his physical body is lost, there is no retrieving it. He will no longer be himself. He will become something new... something enduring and eternal."

"I won't allow it." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"What we're discussing is only a remote possibility. We will do everything in our power to ensure that Dexter won't be in danger."

"No. If there's any chance that Dex might be hurt, then the price is too high. You'll have to find another way."

"It could take us weeks to find an alternative method for accessing the earth element and we would almost certainly have to bring in more personnel."

"I don't care. We'll do what we have to do. If there's even a chance that this will hurt Dex, I won't allow it."

"Be very careful Agent Roberts. Do not overestimate your authority in this situation."

"This has nothing to do with my position or authority. It has to do with common decency. No person of good conscience would allow you to put a child in danger when there was ANY alternative."

"This isn't something that needs to be decided right this minute. Once we've had an opportunity to evaluate the existing barrier and have a better idea of what we're dealing with, we can assess the risks."

"That's fine, as long as it's understood that Dex's safety is not negotiable."

"I can't promise that there will be *no* risk to Dexter, but if at any time he appears to be in danger, I promise that we will stop and consider alternatives."

"Alright then." Agent Roberts said grudgingly, then noticed Dex staring at him wide-eyed. "If anything happened to you I'm pretty sure that your mom would have me wishing for death before the day was over. And that doesn't scare me nearly as bad as what I imagine your father doing. He may be a lowly human, like I am, but you are the pride and joy of his life."

"Did he tell you that?"

"He didn't have to. It was obvious when I saw the two of you together."

"I just asked because he told me that, those exact words."

"Please don't ever doubt that it's true."

The slight smile that crossed Dex's lips told Agent Roberts not only that he *had* doubted his father's words, but also that those doubts had been assuaged.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts was mentally going over his list of needed supplies when he noticed someone approaching in the aisle.

"Dex, could you come back and talk with me and Mr. Hansen for a minute?"

"Yeah. I guess so." Dex said uncertainly.

"He just wants to talk to us about how we're supposed to work together. I've never manipulated magic from another person before."

"Okay." Dex said as he released his seatbelt and stood.

"I'll be here if you need me." Agent Roberts said as Dex scooted past him.

"Thanks." Dex said with a timid smile before leaving with Zanner.

* * * * *

"I feel that I should explain something..." Professor Everstone said, breaking the long silence between them.

"What's that?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Upon reflection, I can see how you might have taken my response regarding the potential danger for Dexter as being a bit more than I had intended. You have to realize that in the course of my work, I deal with facts, statistics and absolutes. When I say that there is a danger for Dexter if he were to participate, I am actually saying that, statistically speaking, the risk for him can't be stated as being absolutely zero."

"How can you be alright with putting Dex in *any* danger?"

"How much of an achievement will it be for him if there's no danger or possibility of failure?"

"What will it matter if he's killed in the process?"

"Agent Roberts, this isn't my first time at the dance. I've seen how these things tend to work out. Please trust me when I say that Dexter needs this. I'm not overstating the importance of it when I say that our upcoming project has the potential to completely alter his destiny. His success or failure in the rest of his life could be determined in the coming days."

"Okay. I'll bite." Shawn said grudgingly, then asked, "How?"

"In the olden days, when it was discovered that someone was an Oriad, the conventional wisdom stated that after a certain point, they would wander away from society, never to be seen again."

"What does that mean?"

"In some cases it would mean that the Oriad would become a hermit, eschewing contact with humans and witches alike. In other circumstances, the Oriad might choose to join with the earth element, at which point they were lost to our world entirely."

"But are you saying that the project that we're working on could keep Dex from withdrawing from society?"

"That's my hope. In finding a way to use his natural ability to contribute to the project, I'm hoping that he will see his own worth and choose to remain in our world with us."

"But with him being neither a human or a witch, what kind of a life can he have?"

"I believe that he can have an adventurous and fulfilling life, putting his natural ability to good use. Projects such as ours require a great deal of natural magic to create and maintain. Once Dexter has had the opportunity to complete his studies, he may choose to commit himself to contributing to such projects. It could end up being a very good life for him."

An announcement on the cabin speakers alerted them that the plane would soon be preparing to land and that everyone should return to their seats.

"Dex's safety is not negotiable." Agent Roberts reiterated.

"Understood." Professor Everstone said simply, then turned his attention forward.

A moment later, Dex arrived and scooted past Agent Roberts to take his seat.

"Did you guys have a good talk?" Agent Roberts asked gently.

"Mr. Hansen was telling us about what we're going to do when we get there. I can't wait to try out the things he was telling us about." Dex said happily.

"I can't wait to see it." Agent Roberts said warmly, then added as an afterthought, "Buckle up, we're about to land."

"What? Oh, yeah." Dex said as he scrambled to find the ends of his seatbelt.

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As the plane began its descent, Agent Roberts took gentle hold of Dex's hand to provide him some measure of comfort.

"I can feel the earth getting closer." Dex said as he held Agent Roberts' hand firmly.

"Does it feel good?"

"Yeah. It's like something wrong inside me is being made right."

"Just sit back and enjoy the feeling. We're almost down."

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts got up from his seat to get in line to disembark he noticed Sky Marshal Butler discreetly waving to get his attention.

Agent Roberts motioned for Dex to go with Professor Everstone, then waited for Sky Marshal Butler to make his way forward in the crowded aisle.

"I don't know what you're up to with those kids, but I'll assume that it's an FBI matter."

Agent Roberts schooled his expression and waited for whatever point Sky Marshal Butler was trying to make.

"I noticed that one of the passengers seemed to be showing quite a bit of interest in your group. I thought I'd give you a 'heads-up'." Sky Marshal Butler said quietly.

"Thank you for keeping an eye on us. What do you think is going on?"

"I don't have any ideas about that, but trust me when I say that he's up to something."

"Got it."

"By the way, I have a list of all the passengers and their assigned seating..." Sky Marshal Butler trailed off, then continued in a whisper, "Do you see that man with the saddlebag carry-on?"

Agent Roberts casually glanced around and easily saw to whom Sky Marshal Butler was referring.

"It would be illegal for me to disclose any passenger information that I have access to, so I won't do that. But if I were to mention the name Elias Ingram without any context, I couldn't be held responsible for whatever conclusions you might reach."

"Good point. And besides, with all the chaos of the airports and flight, who can remember where they heard anything?"

"Take good care of your kids, Agent Roberts."

"I'll do my best. Thank you, Sky Marshall Butler."

* * * * *

Although Agent Roberts had lost sight of the members of his group, he wasn't concerned since he had a direct line-of-sight with Elias Ingram.

As he left the plane, he noticed that Mr. Ingram appeared to be looking for someone. Agent Roberts slowed his pace and discretely kept watch from a distance.

When Mr. Ingram stopped, Agent Roberts followed his gaze and determined that Mr. Ingram was watching his group, more specifically, the students.

After a moment to consider, Agent Roberts decided to join his group and keep careful watch on Mr. Ingram, out of the corner of his eye.

"Did you get lost?" Dex asked as Agent Roberts approached.

"I stopped to help someone with their overhead compartment. What's going on here?"

"We were just waiting on you to catch up with us before going to the baggage claim."

"Let's go then." Agent Roberts said as he discreetly glanced in Mr. Ingram's direction to find that he was still intently watching their group.

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As they arrived at the baggage claim, Paul quickly asked, "Do we have time to go to the bathroom?"

"It should be a few minutes before our luggage starts unloading. The restrooms are over there." Professor Everstone said as he indicated a doorway to the left of them.

"Be right back." Paul said as he started walking with G following a step behind.

Agent Roberts glanced around and easily spotted Mr. Ingram standing by a column several feet away, apparently checking the messages on his phone.

At least that had been Agent Roberts' immediate assumption.

Something about the way Mr. Ingram was holding the phone made Shawn realize that Mr. Ingram was using his phone to take pictures. Agent Roberts quickly deduced that from Mr. Ingram's position, that he was taking pictures of Zanner and Dex.

"Shawn." A voice said quietly from over Agent Roberts' shoulder.

Agent Roberts turned and asked, "Do you see that man with the phone by the column?"

"The one taking pictures of the kids?" Agent Fastbeck asked in return.

"Keep an eye on him while I make a call."

"I'm on it."

Agent Roberts selected the proper name from his contact list and hit the icon to dial.

A moment later, Agent Roberts said, "Agent Simmons? Would you have a free minute to help me with something?"

"Would you do a quick search for a man named Elias Ingram? He would be listed on United Flight 323 just now landing in Lexington."

"Everything's fine. I'd just like to get an idea of what kind of a guy we're dealing with here."

"No. In fact, the only other person who works in my field office is here at the airport with me. That's why I'm calling you."

"Just give me the short version."

"Right. I could have gone all day without hearing that."

"No. I'd rather not leave a paper trail. If I need to know anything else, I'll look it up for myself when I get back to the office."

"Everything's fine here. Gotta go. Thanks for the help. I appreciate it."

"Yeah. Bye."

"What did you find out?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"Not much. I'd guess that we're looking at a ghost."

"What do you want to do?"

"There's not much that we *can* do. All he's doing is taking pictures in a public area. Any action that we could take would only draw attention to us and cause us a delay that we can't afford."

"Is there a problem?" Professor Everstone asked as he approached.

"Professor Everstone, this is Agent Conrad Fastbeck from the FBI. We just noticed that there's a man taking pictures of the children. I'm not sure that there's anything we can do about it without causing a delay in our mission." Agent Roberts said as he glanced in Mr. Ingram's direction.

Professor Everstone followed his gaze, then said, "Give me a moment. I believe that we will be able to handle this."

Agents Roberts and Fastbeck watched as Professor Everstone walked directly toward Filipe.

"What do you think he's going to do?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"I have no idea. But Professor Everstone seems to have something in mind."

"What do you think this guy's up to?"

"My first impulse is to think that he might be a human trafficker, taking pictures of kids that he'd like to abduct... maybe forwarding the pictures he takes to his accomplices so that they can stage a distraction and carry out the abduction before we leave the airport."

"Paul!" Professor Everstone called as Paul and G were returning from the bathroom.

Agents Roberts and Fastbeck watched as Paul altered his course and joined Professor Everstone and Filipe.

After a brief serious discussion, Paul and Filipe turned their attention toward Mr. Ingram.

Agent Roberts followed their combined stares and saw a confused expression come over Mr. Ingram's face.

"What do you think they did to him?" Agent Fastbeck asked in a whisper.

Agent Roberts watched Mr. Ingram lower his phone and intently type on it.

"I don't know, but it doesn't seem to be anything overtly harmful." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"Good. As I understand it, we're going to need to be leaving as soon as you have your luggage."

"We're also going to be meeting the last member of our party... some historian or something named Brown."

A movement caused both agents to look up and they watched as Mr. Ingram irritably removed the battery from his phone.

Unable to restrain his curiosity, Agent Roberts walked to Professor Everstone to hopefully get some answers.

* * * * *

"Okay, what did you do to Mr. Ingram?" Agent Roberts asked simply.

"In preparation for our upcoming endeavor, I researched the achievements and strengths of our students. When faced with Mr. Ingram's behavior, I remembered that Filipe has shown exceptional aptitude for bestowing blessings and curses. Since there was a need to be discrete, I thought that I might just get Filipe to do some small enchantment on Mr. Ingram's phone."

"And he did that from all the way over here?"

"Although he normally might not be able to do so on his own, Filipe and Paul have become accustomed to working together to augment both their abilities. I'm not entirely sure what spell they used, but whatever it was seems to have had the desired effect."

Agent Roberts glanced back toward Mr. Ingram to find him still fixated on trying to get his phone to function.

"We chirped his phone." Paul interjected as he stepped closer and officially joined their conversation.

"Chirped?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It's something that I picked up in my technomage class. I can't cast a spell like that, but Filipe can. It's a curse that causes bad luck with technology. It's a quick 'one off', so we don't have to fuel it much or worry about leaving a cursed item laying around afterward. We put the spell on the phone, the spell activated and cursed the guy holding it, then the spell that bestowed the curse was spent."

"So Mr. Ingram is now cursed to have bad luck with technology?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Paul confirmed, then cautiously asked, "That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"I'm not exactly sure what I wanted. I was just concerned that a stranger was taking pictures of the kids. I wanted to stop him without causing a big complicated scene." Agent Roberts explained.

"Well, I don't think he'll be taking any more pictures for a while... Maybe not ever. Filipe's never used that spell before so he's not used to regulating the power on it."

"I think what you guys did is fine." Agent Roberts assured him, then turned to Professor Everstone and said, "But we'll still need to keep a close watch on the kids until we're away from the airport. If Mr. Ingram has any associates lurking around here, they still might try something."

"I'll let everyone know to be on guard. If anyone tries anything, I can assure you that they *will* regret it." Professor Everstone promised.

"I believe you." Agent Roberts said honestly before returning to Agent Fastbeck's side.

* * * * *

"So, what did they do?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he kept the majority of his attention on Mr. Ingram's struggle with his phone.

"Cursed him. He's going to have a problem with technology for a while... maybe forever."

"Have you thought that he might be a spook?" Agent Fastbeck asked slowly.

"I can't think of a legitimate reason for any government agent to conduct an investigation by secretly taking pictures of minor children in a public airport. I think it's more likely that he's paid good money to have his identity 'scrubbed' so that his past can't provide us any clues as to what he's up to."

"Do you think it's worth digging deeper?"

"If you have the time when you get back, it might turn up something interesting, but I'm not too worried about it."

"I tend to have more time than I know what to do with. We'll see how things go."

The sound of a tone overhead drew their attention, then the luggage conveyor started moving.

"Would you mind helping me carry our camping equipment? We have quite a bit." Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"How about I get us a cart? Stay and watch for your luggage while I do that."

Agent Roberts watched as Agent Fastbeck hurried away.

* * * * *

While Agent Roberts was waiting, he noticed a paunchy man approaching and looking around uncertainly.

When Professor Everstone noticed the man, he walked up to him and asked, "Mr. Brown?"

"Charles *Bentley* Brown." The man said sternly.

"Paul. Filipe. Please come here for a moment." Professor Everstone said to the boys who had drifted a few feet away.

"Yes Professor?" Paul responded as they approached.

"Paul Darroch and Filipe Pena, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Brown..."

"Mr. *Bentley* Brown." The man corrected.

Agent Roberts and Paul shared a look, and even though neither said a word, both knew that they were remembering Mr. Darroch's assessment of Mr Bentley Brown.

"Of course." Professor Everstone said flatly, then continued, "Since the two of you are going to be responsible for the manipulation of the water element in our upcoming project, you'll be working closely with Mr. Bentley Brown."

Paul and Filipe shared a look, then after an uncomfortable moment of silence, Filipe finally said, "It's nice to meet you Mr. Bentley Brown."

Paul's dubious glance at his classmate spoke louder than words about his feelings on the matter.

"May I assume that you have the artifact with you?" Professor Everstone asked in a leading tone.

"Yes. Of course." Mr. Bentley Brown said as he indicated the valise that he was carrying.

Agent Roberts noted that Mr. Bentley Brown hadn't bothered to show even an obligatory level of courtesy in response to Filipe's somewhat forced greeting.

"Once we've collected our baggage we'll be ready to leave."

"In my preparations I was unable to secure lodgings in the vicinity of Waxell. I have reserved a room in a town called 'Gooseneck'..." Mr. Bentley Brown said somewhat distastefully, "I'm not sure what provisions will need to be made to compensate for that."

"As soon as we arrive in Waxell, we'll drop off our personal belongings then continue on to evaluate the site. We'll set up a schedule at that time and you can make your plans from there accordingly." Professor Everstone said firmly.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts turned his attention toward the luggage conveyor and noticed that G had retrieved the majority of their equipment.

"Thanks for doing that G." Agent Roberts said as he plucked his suitcase of personal belongings from the conveyor.

"I saw that you were busy. So is that guy as big of a prick as Dad was saying?"

Although Agent Roberts was adverse to name calling, he felt that in this instance that it was more important to be honest.

"He seems that way. Try not to let his pompous attitude draw you into behaving disrespectfully toward him. It will only end up making things more difficult for everyone."

"I'm not the one you're going to have to worry about. I grew up having to deal with people like that because of Dad's work. Paul's the one who doesn't have any patience for self-important fools." G said frankly.

"If something happens, could you help me to keep Paul from escalating the situation?"

"I don't want to make things more difficult for anyone, but if Paul's right, I'm going to back him up." G said honestly.

"I guess I can understand that." Agent Roberts said as Agent Fastbeck approached with a luggage cart.

"Do you need some help loading that?" G asked as he looked at the pile of luggage.

"Yes. Thank you. I really appreciate it."

Chapter 17

As Agent Fastbeck pulled away from the airport, he quietly asked, "Do you want to fill me in?"

"Honestly, as far as I can tell, everything seems to be just how it appears on the surface. The Southseid barrier can't protect the Wudewas so this group was called in to resolve the situation."

"What's with bringing the kids?"

"They felt that it was an opportunity to train the next generation to deal with situations like this. These kids are the most talented in their specialties and I think they'll benefit not only from the training, but also from being acknowledged for their maturity and talents."

"It still seems strange that they would include us. My first inclination is to think that this might be some kind of a setup to distract us while some other agenda is being undertaken elsewhere."

"Since I was included in some of the planning, I think that if that were the case I would have, at the very least, come up with some unresolved questions. So far the only things that have bothered me haven't had anything to do with the mission."

"What's bothering you?"

"First, I was contacted by a Sky Marshal on the flight here. He's the one who warned me about Mr. Ingram. Second is Mr. Ingram himself. We never really determined his motives or even who he really is."

"I'll be looking into that when I get back to the office."

"Third is Mr. *Bentley* Brown. The guy is so unlikable and rude that I can't help but believe that it's an act to prevent people from wanting to get to know more about him."

"Do you think the three things are somehow related?"

"I can't see any connection so far. But it won't hurt for me to stay on the lookout."

"Do you have your sat phone?"

"I don't leave home without it."

"Be sure to keep me posted and I'll be ready to do research for you if you need it."

"Thanks. Even though it probably won't lead to anything, I'll still feel better knowing that you're looking into things."

"I only have the most general idea of what they're planning to do. Is there anything that you think I should know about?"

"I probably don't know much more than you do. In fact, I don't think anyone *really* knows what's going to happen. They're waiting until they can see exactly how things are at the barrier before they make any firm plans."

"I've been doing my best to keep tabs on the people who attacked the Wudewas. It seems that they've made a series of questionable decisions since their encounter with us. Do you happen to know what hypnotic suggestions they might be under?"

"Not exactly. But it wouldn't surprise me if Lane and Duran might have left them with some extra little self-defeating programming to repay them in some small way for what they did to the Wudewas. If it were left to me to decide, I probably would've done worse."

"As you know, Dr. Mickel, Sylvia Richter and Corbin Spieth have all confessed the crimes that they have committed over the years. What I've found surprising is that all three have ended up in protective custody, separated from the general prison populations."

"Good. I hope they're miserable."

"I'm not going to shed a tear on their behalf, I was just curious if you knew what Lane and Duran might have directed them to do to cause something like this to happen."

"They didn't tell me anything, but whatever it was, I have no problem with what they did."

Agent Fastbeck nodded his understanding.

"So, did I miss any excitement in Waxell while I was away?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Wynona Frost caught Leroy buggering one of her chickens. Apparently, she's pretty scrappy with that cane of hers. Sheriff Daniels kept Leroy locked up overnight until he could sober up, then charged him with trespassing."

"Is that all? I can think of half a dozen other charges that might apply in a situation like that."

"I got the feeling that Ed didn't want to make too big a deal of it. I think he's embarrassed on Leroy's behalf and would rather that the entire incident to go away."

"And yet he still told you all of this?"

"Of course not."

"Deputy Kemp?"

"Waxell doesn't need social media with Deputy Kemp around."

"As strange as it sounds, it seems to work. All the down-home charm and back-woods antics makes for an idyllic society. I really wouldn't want for it to be any other way."

"I think *that* may be part of why you were assigned to the Waxell office. I get the feeling that they want people who can accept it for what it is and who might even fight to protect it, if called upon to do so."

"I think that being able to accept the colonies of witches and bigfoots might also have something to do with it."

"I can't help but think that they're all part of the same thing."

"It *does* seem to be quite a bit to be a coincidence."

"Well, from what little I've gleaned from the conversations around me, it seems that the Brynn colony and the Southseid colony were established at roughly the same time."

"And with Waxell being in such close proximity to both of them, it seems to make sense that they're somehow involved."

"I doubt that we'll figure it out anytime soon."

* * * * *

After a long period of silence, Agent Roberts cautiously said, "While I was visiting Mr. Darroch's house Paul and G were telling me how much they admire you for what you did at the Brynn colony."

"How much did they tell you?"

"They spoke mostly in generalities when it came to what you actually did. But they said that you chose to accept a curse for the sake of the people of Brynnhollow."

"I suppose from their point of view, that would be true."

"What would it be from your point of view? ...that is, if you don't mind me asking."

"I wouldn't feel right sharing the details of the situation that the Brynns were facing. But suffice it to say that there was really no choice for me. I was the only one who could possibly have helped them. We were all working very hard, trying to coordinate the merger of Brynnhollow and Brynnhaven. If I didn't do anything, it would have been nearly impossible for the two communities to unite. Mistrust and paranoia would have kept them from coming together."

"I don't know anything about their situation, but even so, I still don't understand what you could have done to have made such a profound impact."

"By gaining the ability to bestow a curse, I essentially restored the balance. Before, both communities were driven toward certain actions and behaviors that would have made it impossible for them to live together. In fact, that's what caused them to form separate villages. Someone before me found a way to relieve the compulsion on the citizens of Brynnhaven. When I arrived, it became obvious that a counterbalancing force would be needed in Brynnhollow if the two groups were ever going to merge."

"Do you think it would be possible for me to visit Brynnhollow one of these days?"

"I don't see any problem with that. Since you already know about them and have proven that you're trustworthy, I don't think anyone would object."

"With all the weirdness already in my life, I probably shouldn't be doing anything to invite more. But after everything that I've already been involved in, I feel like I have a stake in what happens to them."

"Just, whatever you do, don't get into an intimate relationship with anyone you meet there. We're dealing with magic and curses so the only shot you'll have for a happy ending is to not put yourself in that situation to begin with."

"I don't see that being a problem."

"You may think that now, but they're some really special people. They're uncomplicated and hard-working. Although they can be honest to a fault, at the same time they're naive about the ugliness that's pervasive in the outside world. The allure is undeniable."

"It sounds to me like you're breaking your own rule."

"There's someone special that I've been seeing, but she's not a native Brynn."

"I don't understand. I thought that the community was isolated within a barrier."

"It's complicated. Suffice it to say that Andrea is an outsider like I am. She's a human who was cursed, then given the ability to bestow a curse."

"And the two of you are in a relationship?"

"We're at the beginning of one. Technically she's still married to her husband. I don't want to move too quickly and take the chance that she still has feelings for him."

"That sounds like it could turn into a big mess."

"I suppose it has that potential, but so far her husband and kids have been very supportive of our relationship."

"Is that what Cain was talking about when we were hiking to the Southseid colony?"

"Yes. He and his twin brother are great kids. With all the dramatic changes in their lives, I would understand it if they were having problems dealing with things, but they seem to be thriving in their new situation. I couldn't be more proud of them if they were my own."

"I don't know what Cain went through, but he seems like a good kid... very responsible."

"Cain and his twin brother Deimos were raised in the outside world and led fairly typical lives. Then one day, out of the blue, their father took them to Brynnhollow and told them that they were cursed beings and could never return to the only way of life that they had ever known. In that day, they lost everything that they knew and everything that they were."

"I can sympathize."

"Me too. I suppose that's part of why I feel such a kinship with them. The people who were born and raised in Brynnhollow can't fathom what a culture shock it is."

"Worse than Waxell?"

"Actually, yes. Most people in Brynnhollow don't have electricity. They've never seen a computer or even a television."

"Seriously?!"

"As primitive as it sounds, it's also kind of nice. Life there is slower... it's quieter. The people are hard-working and decent. Of course, life is hard for them. If they don't work, they and their families don't eat. They're always looking ahead toward the next season, trying to prepare for the worst case scenario. You have to admire them for facing such adversity without complaint."

"It sounds like you really like it there."

"For now, I'm needed where I am. But one day I can see myself disappearing from the outside world and settling down there."

"I've never felt that way about anyplace that I've been."

"We'll see how you feel once you've visited Brynnhollow."

"I can't wait."

* * * * *

The trip to Waxell continued without incident. Agents Fastbeck and Roberts had some time to review the few cases that they had worked on in their short time together. That reminded Agent Fastbeck that Matthew Farmer had called the previous day.

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"To talk to you. I offered to try and get a message to you in the field, but he said that it wasn't urgent and could wait."

"I think we're in the cell phone 'dead zone' by now, it'll have to wait until we get to a landline."

"We'll be there soon. Is there anything you're going to need help with before we leave for the Southseid colony?"

"I just want to take everyone to my house so that they can drop off their things. After that, we'll stop in Waxell for a bite to eat, then we'll pick up some food from the store for lunch and dinner tonight."

"Are you going to need any help carrying things?"

"If you wouldn't mind carrying a tent, I think everything else should distribute fairly evenly amongst the rest of the group."

"Sounds good. How sure are you about the food situation?"

"I'm planning on taking inventory right before we leave Waxell. If anyone comes up short, we'll be able to deal with it then and there."

"It looks like the weather report was right. From the look of the sky, you'd better do what you're going to do and be on your way."

"I may have to adjust my original timetable a little bit if we're going to have a hope of making it to the site before the rain starts."

"How are you going to do that? I had assumed that you had already scheduled everything for optimum efficiency."

"I padded the schedule with rest breaks after each of the more difficult stages of the hike. From the way it looks, I think we'd better just ask if everyone's alright to continue and if no one *needs* a break right then, we'll keep moving."

"I'll help you keep an eye on the others. If I notice anyone having trouble or pushing themselves to a dangerous degree, I'll let you know."

"Shouldn't that be the other way around? You're the boss, after all."

"I'm just going along for as long as it takes to explain things to the Wudewas. Although these people are powerful witches, so far as I know, none of them are experienced outdoorsmen. If things suddenly take a bad turn, there can't be any ambiguity about who's in charge."

"I don't know how much of an outdoorsman I am. I've had the required survival training, but I've never really had much of an interest in hiking out to the middle of nowhere with only the most basic necessities of life and barely adequate sanitation. I did what I had to do when it was required of me and got through it the best that I could."

"Don't let the presence of the teachers and kids distract you. This is a job. You have skills that are necessary for the success of the operation. While it might make the job easier for you if you were to feel some sort of a stake in the outcome, the fact of the matter is that regardless of what you feel, you've got your orders to follow."

"I guess it's good that I'm already invested, so that won't be a worry."

"I'll hold you to that, *Agent Roberts*."

* * * * *

It wasn't but a few minutes later that they were pulling into downtown Waxell.

"I'll drop you at your house, then drive back to the office to check on things... unless you need me at your place for some reason."

"No. That'll work out fine. I'll get everyone settled in, then take them into town for breakfast before buying our perishable supplies and heading out. Would you like to have breakfast with us, or do you want for us to stop by the office on the way out of town?"

"I'll probably meet up with you at the diner. But if something comes up, I'll deal with it and catch up to you before it's time to leave."

"What about Mr. Bentley Brown? Do you have any last minute advice for me regarding him?"

"For as long as he's useful to the project, use him. As soon as his part is done, cut him loose. Don't trust or depend on him any more than you absolutely have to."

"I get the feeling that he won't be too torn up about it when it's time for us to part company."

"Keep it professional. Don't let it devolve into a competition of personalities."

"No problem there. He doesn't appear to have one."

"That's probably for the best."

* * * * *

When they arrived at Agent Roberts' house, Shawn was surprised when Agent Fastbeck also got out of the car. Before he could ask, Agent Fastbeck went to the trunk and started to unload the equipment.

"You're going with us to set up camp, aren't you?" Agent Roberts asked uncertainly.

"That's the plan." Agent Fastbeck said simply, then added, "But plans can change. If something comes up and I get diverted, this way you'll have everything that you'll need with you."

"Are you *expecting* something to come up?" Agent Roberts asked as he opened the trunk of his car.

"No. But considering the way things tend to go, it wouldn't surprise me if something did. If I end up having to take care of other things, I'll catch up to you. I'm assuming that you'll be using Dr. Mickel's campsite."

"I hadn't really thought that far ahead, but since the site's already been cleared and is relatively level it would make sense to use it as

our base camp." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully as he transferred items into his trunk.

"Good. If anything comes up that I end up not travelling with you, I'll meet you there." Agent Fastbeck said decisively.

"Why do I have the feeling that you're up to something?"

"Even though it may not seem like it sometimes, the two of us are responsible for a large geographical area. We can't let this mission distract us from all the rest. You do what you need to do for the mission and I'll make sure that everyone else is taken care of."

Agent Roberts nodded, then slowly said, "Thanks for keeping an eye on the big picture."

"I'm the boss. That's what I do." Agent Fastbeck said with a grin before going back to his car.

* * * * *

"What are we doing now?" Paul asked as he approached Agent Roberts.

"If you'll get your personal belongings together, I'll take you inside and show you to your rooms." Agent Roberts said simply.

"We've got everything right here." Paul said with accomplishment.

Agent Roberts looked around the group, then said, "As soon as we're done here, we'll be going into town to get something to eat, and then we'll be heading off to the colony site. Be sure to bring your sleeping bags inside with you. Also make sure that you don't leave any of your hiking gear here because we won't be coming back until tonight."

"So this will be where we'll be spending the night?" Miss Oaken asked to be sure.

"Yes. While there's always the possibility that we might need to stay at the barrier site for some reason, we're intending to hike out

and come back here each night so that we can all get a good night of sleep in relative comfort and safety."

When it seemed that everyone understood what they were doing, Agent Roberts walked up to the door, then unlocked it.

* * * * *

"Nice place!" Paul said as he looked around.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" Agent Roberts said proudly.

"Excuse me!" A voice said from the back of the group.

Agent Roberts followed the voice, then had to clamp down on his natural reaction and finally asked, "What can I do for you, Mr. Bentley Brown?"

"I *thought* that we were going to be leaving for the barrier site shortly after arrival. Why are we wasting time here?"

"I'm showing everyone to their rooms so that when we return, they'll be able to go directly to bed if they're tired."

"Can't we just get on with it?"

"No." Agent Roberts said simply, then turning his attention to the rest of their group he continued, "Follow me."

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts opened the door to the stairway, he thought to say, "These rooms haven't been used for over fifty years. I've done some basic cleaning, but they're probably not up to your usual standards. That's why I asked everyone to bring sleeping bags. I can't vouch for the functionality of the mattresses. I've actually been avoiding dealing with them."

"Don't worry. We've got this covered." Paul assured him.

"All the rooms are basically the same, so feel free to take whichever ones you want."

After opening the first door they encountered, Miss Oaken asked, "Corabeth, why don't we share this room?"

"Okay." Corabeth said easily and seemed to be pleased that it had been decided.

Paul opened the door across the hall and looked inside before saying, "G and I can take this one."

"Dex, do you want to share a room with me?" Zanner asked hopefully.

The surprise on Dex's face at being asked was obvious. Agent Roberts expected his immediate agreement, but was surprised when Dex asked, "What about Filipe?"

"Yeah. I think the three of us can share a room if you want to." Zanner said easily.

"There are plenty of rooms..." Agent Roberts began to say but was interrupted.

"If the job gets really boring, this might end up being the best part of the trip." Zanner explained.

"Fair enough." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

Professor Everstone glanced at Mr. Hansen and said, "It appears that we can each have a room of our own."

"That works for me." Mr. Hansen said comfortably.

"Mr. Bentley Brown, it appears that I still have one unclaimed room, if you would care to use it."

"I'm accustomed to more *civilized* accommodations."

"As you like." Agent Roberts said without concern, then said loudly to the rest of the group, "Stow your gear and we'll meet in the living room downstairs in five minutes."

After waiting to see if anyone had any comments or questions, Agent Roberts went downstairs, followed by Mr. Bentley Brown.

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"I'm just going to pack a few things and then I need to make a phone call. You're welcome to wait, or you can drive back to Waxell and wait for us there. We shouldn't be too long." Agent Roberts said as he walked to his bedroom.

"It wasn't my choice to come here." Mr. Bentley Brown said darkly.

"We're all making the best of the situation we've found ourselves in." Agent Roberts said simply.

After a long silent moment, Mr. Bentley Brown finally said, "I think I *will* drive back into town. Where and when should I meet up with you?"

"We'll be having breakfast at the Waxell Diner on the main street. If you leave now, we should arrive about five minutes behind you."

"I don't know why they insisted on including a *human* on this mission, but don't expect me to go out of my way for you." Mr. Bentley Brown said before stalking away.

"*I never thought that you would*." Agent Roberts thought to himself as he packed a few supplemental pieces of clothing to serve as additional layers, should they be needed.

* * * * *

"*Hello?*"

"Matthew? It's Agent Roberts. I'm returning your call."

"*Please call me Matt. Thanks for calling me back.*"

"What's going on? Have you completely recovered?"

"*Mostly. I was never claustrophobic before but now close spaces make me really uncomfortable. Besides that, I think I'm doing okay.*"

"Make sure you talk to someone about that. What seems like a small problem right now can grow into something more if you ignore it."

"*Yeah. I'll do that.*"

"Were you needing to talk to me about something?"

"*Yeah. You see, my birthday is coming up and we're going to have a little party... not like a* ***party*** *party, but we're going to get a few people together and have a cookout or something like that, depending on the weather.*"

"That sounds nice."

"*Yeah. Well, I was trying to decide who I wanted to invite and I was just wondering if maybe you'd like to come over and celebrate my birthday with me? Theresa and Doug will be there and maybe one or two other people.*"

"Actually, I'm in the middle of a case right now..."

"*My birthday's on the 23rd. That's over two weeks away.*"

"Let me see how things work out with the case that I'm on. If it's possible for me to be there, I'll get back with you and confirm the time and address with you."

"*Thank you. I know it seems like kind of a weird thing to ask, but to me it feels like the only reason I have to celebrate anything is because of you. It'd feel wrong to me if you weren't there.*"

"I'll do my best to get the day off. But right now I have a job to do."

"*I understand. Thank you for at least considering it. Goodbye*."

"Goodbye Matt."

* * * * *

"So, does everyone have their sleeping bags and personal items settled?"

Nods and sounds of affirmation emanated from the group.

"And everyone has all the hiking gear that they're going to need in the cars?" Agent Roberts asked to be sure.

Again, everyone seemed to be in agreement.

"Before we leave, I need for all of you to gather whatever type of canteens or water flasks that you're going to be using and fill them up. We're not going to get another good chance to do that." Agent Roberts said firmly.

It seemed as though everyone in attendance thought that that was a perfectly reasonable idea.

"As soon as that's done, we should be ready to go."

"To the Waxell Diner?" G asked hopefully.

"That's right. We're going to stop in there for breakfast."

"You guys are going to love it. It's really old and kind of creepy and they have really good food." G told the group enthusiastically.

Agent Roberts smiled to himself and watched as everyone set about the task of filling their canteens.

* * * * *

After finding a parking place, Agent Roberts waited outside the Waxell Diner for the group to assemble.

"Remember that we're going to be around regular people in here. Be careful what you say." Agent Roberts said simply, then saw someone approaching.

"Good morning Otis. How are you doing today?"

"I'm fine. Just need some coffee." Otis responded, then asked, "What've you got going on here?"

"Our office was asked to host a field trip. We're going to take the kids out hiking in the wild."

"It looks like it could be a miserable day." Otis said as he looked toward the sky.

"Well, if we're going to expose them to nature, we might as well show them all of it."

"Even though it might not be the most comfortable hike, it should still be beautiful."

"Let's get inside and get you some coffee. I need to get these kids fed so we can be on our way."

Otis stepped forward and held the door open, allowing the entire group to precede him into the diner.

* * * * *

Once inside, Agent Roberts spotted Agent Fastbeck and Mr. Bentley Brown sitting at separate tables.

"Would you like to sit with us Otis?"

"I'm just going to fill my mug and be on my way. I have some things that I have to do."

"I'll see you later, then. Have a good day." Agent Roberts said before joining Agent Fastbeck at his table.

Within a minute Paul and G had also joined them.

"So, are you guys excited about what's to come?"

"Sure." Paul said immediately, then added, "It's going to be great to be able to do something *real*. Up to now just about everything I've done has been for school."

"I get the feeling that that's the experience your teachers are wanting for you to gain through this. But beyond that, I think another reason that you're here is because you've shown that you're of sufficient wit and maturity that you'll be able to embrace this opportunity and make the most of it."

"That sounds really nice, but what does it mean *exactly*?"

"There's a time for work and a time for play. That doesn't mean that you can't be playful sometimes. Just remember to make the work a priority. We're counting on you to think on your feet and do your absolute best."

"I'm kinda used to pushing myself. Our friends, Nazzy and Vinda, are always talking about how I like to set the bar really high. You won't have to worry about me slacking. There's just that one thing that's bothering me."

"What's that?"

"If I'm understanding things right, Filipe and I are going to be responsible for..." Paul trailed off and looked around to see who was close enough to hear before continuing more quietly, "...the 'water' part of the spell."

"I have no idea about how that works."

"You see, the thing is, my specialty is fire. I've learned how to manipulate water, but I usually have to access a conduit to channel it from an outside source. I don't have enough natural ability to be able to do much of anything on my own."

"Do you think Professor Everstone knows about that?"

"He has to. If he's in charge of the project, that'd be one of the first things he'd check on." Paul said reasonably.

"Then trust that he knows what he's doing now. While he may ask you to do something that pushes you to the limit of your abilities, I don't think he would ask you to do anything that you clearly aren't capable of."

"I guess not."

"If you find yourself being uncertain of your own abilities at some point, trust in Professor Everstone to know exactly what is needed to make the project a success."

"I guess that I should just be grateful that I'm able to use more than one element. A lot of people can't do that."

"Again, I have no idea how it works."

"Are you guys ready to order?" The waitress asked as she approached the table.

"Good morning, Tracey. You know Agent Fastbeck, I'd like for you to meet G and Paul. They're going to be visiting for a few days." Agent Roberts said pleasantly.

"Welcome to Waxell. Remember that if you need anything while you're visiting, just stop in here and we'll do our best to help you. Any friend of the FBI is a friend of ours."

"Um, yeah. We'll do that." Paul said with astonishment at the unusually friendly and sincere welcome.

"Arn and Harry have a batch of biscuits just about to come out of the oven. So if you don't have your hearts set on something else, I'd recommend that."

"Shawn and I have learned that when Tracey tells you that something's good, you'd better take her word for it." Agent Fastbeck interjected.

"Um, yeah. That sounds good to me." Paul stammered.

"Me too." G quickly added.

Agents Fastbeck and Roberts nodded their immediate and whole-hearted agreement.

"How would you like your eggs, hun?" Tracey asked, focusing her attention on Paul.

"What eggs? I thought I ordered biscuits and gravy." Paul slowly asked.

"It wouldn't be a proper breakfast without eggs... and there'll be some ham on there too, just to round it out." Tracey explained.

"Um, I like my eggs just... normal... you know, cooked but not too cooked." Paul tried to explain.

"Over medium." G said quietly.

Tracey wrote that down, then turned her attention to G and asked, "What about you, sweetie?"

"I'll have the same." G said immediately.

"Make that three." Agent Roberts added as soon as her attention turned to him.

"Four." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

"Coffee all around?"

"That sounds good to me." Agent Roberts said with a smile, then thought to ask, "How about you guys."

After a moment to consider, G finally said, "Yeah."

"Me too." Paul added after him.

"You guys are easy." Tracey said fondly, then thought to add, "I'll be right back with your drinks."

"Thank you, Tracey." Agent Fastbeck said after her as she walked away.

"Do you still think this place is creepy?" Agent Roberts asked the boys with a smile.

"Totally." Paul immediately answered, then qualified his response by adding, "But it's creepy in the good way. You know, like G's room."

Agent Roberts looked around the 1950's style diner critically for a moment, then said, "I doubt that I could have explained it better."

As Agent Roberts looked over the people at the other tables, his attention was drawn by the solitary figure looking on with disgust as he polished his flatware with his table napkin.

"It looks like Mr. Bentley Brown doesn't approve of our choice of dining establishments." Agent Roberts quietly told Agent Fastbeck beside him.

"I get the feeling that not very much in this world meets with Mr. Bentley Brown's approval."

"What a sad and bitter way to live, never finding beauty or joy in anything. Why would someone choose to live their life seeing only the negative?" Agent Roberts asked contemplatively.

"Improper potty training." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

"What?" Agent Roberts asked in surprise as both the boys at their table started giggling uncontrollably, revealing that they had been listening.

"Just a hunch." Agent Fastbeck said with a slight unconcerned shrug, then smiled as Tracey approached with four mugs of coffee.

Agent Roberts glanced at Mr. Bentley Brown, who was now glaring at them disapprovingly.

The sound of G and Paul trying to fight down their laughter brought an involuntary smile to Agent Roberts' face as he considered just how much he had come to cherish the good friends that he had made.

Chapter 18

After a delicious and filling breakfast, Agent Roberts stood and said, "We'll be leaving in a few minutes. Make sure to stop by the bathroom before we go. You're not going to get another chance for a while."

"Do you need anything from the office before we leave?" Agent Fastbeck asked quietly.

"No. I have everything I need in my car."

"So, are we heading out as soon as everyone's done with the bathroom?"

"We need to stop by the store for food. We'll be taking off from there."

"Good. Then while you're doing that, I'm going to see if Hyatt's in yet. If he's not, then I'll call him later and ask him to keep an eye on the shop for us."

"Sounds good."

* * * * *

The stop by the little mom & pop market ended up being more entertaining than Agent Roberts would have guessed.

He couldn't decide which was funnier, the reactions of the adults to the prices or the reactions of the teenagers to the alien foodstuffs from a different era.

After explaining Farina to Corabeth and Postum to G, Agent Roberts decided that they had dallied long enough and started herding his charges toward the checkout.

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts stepped out the door of the market, he immediately spotted Agent Fastbeck waiting out front in his car.

"Is Hyatt going to watch it for you?"

"Yes. I told him that I'd call him later to make sure that everything was alright."

"That sounds like it should work."

"It looks like everyone's about ready to go. Is there anything else you need to do before we leave?"

"The belly's full and the bladder's empty. I think that about covers it."

"Thanks for sharing. But I was really asking about last minute supplies..."

"I think I've got that covered. Why don't you take point while I bring up the rear, so we don't have to worry about anyone falling behind."

"Sounds like a plan. As soon as everyone's ready, give me the signal and I'll lead the way."

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts, can we ride with you?" Paul asked hopefully as he approached with G and Filipe following close behind.

"I thought you'd want to ride with your teachers so that you could get a hint about what you're going to be doing." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I don't think that Corabeth and Miss Oaken would want us tagging along with them." G said frankly.

"I'm pretty sure that Dex and Zanner are going to be talking to Mr. Hansen about earth and nature stuff that doesn't have anything to do with me." Filipe said regretfully.

"And even if we rode with Professor Everstone, I doubt that he'd tell us anything about what he's planning." G thought to add.

"And if we don't ride with him, then we're stuck riding with Mr. Bentley Brown." Filipe said gravely.

"I'd rather walk." Paul said bluntly.

"Point taken." Agent Roberts admitted, then continued, "Let me open the trunk for you so that you can stow your gear."

"Thanks Agent Roberts." Filipe said sincerely.

"Actually, I'll appreciate the company. I just naturally assumed that you'd be excited about your upcoming mission and would want to spend the trip talking to your teachers about that." Agent Roberts said reasonably as he led the boys to where his car was parked.

"That *would* be nice, but I think we've been told everything that they're going to tell us until they've actually *seen* the barrier and decided what we need to do next." Paul said frankly.

Agent Roberts walked around to the back of the car and opened the trunk as he said, "When you put it that way, I have to agree with your reasoning. Although I'm a little surprised that you didn't ask Agent Fastbeck. After all, you've known him longer."

"It probably wouldn't be bad... but it might feel kinda weird, like we were spying on Cain and Deimos or horning in on something that belongs to them." Paul said uncomfortably at the thought.

"Yeah. I think they're starting to get close and they don't need anyone screwing up what they've already got going on." G agreed.

After placing the boys' backpacks in his trunk, Agent Roberts closed it, then indicated for the boys to get into the car.

"Does everyone have everything that they're going to need for a while?" Agent Roberts asked as he settled into the driver's seat.

"I think we're good." G assured him.

Agent Roberts saw that Agent Fastbeck had been watching and flashed his lights to signal that he was ready to go.

A moment later, Agent Fastbeck led the procession down the main street of Waxell, away from the M&K Market.

* * * * *

"Is it weird for you being around us?" Filipe asked from the passenger seat.

"No. Not really." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I grew up hearing all kinds of stories about witches, but I thought that they were fairy tales. When I found out that they're real... and that I'm one of them... that was kind of a lot to take in. I just wondered if it was anything like that for you."

"In a way, but by the time I found out about witches, my view of the world had already drastically changed. I was surprised, but it wasn't the earth shattering revelation that it would have been if I had encountered witches first."

"What else did you find out about?"

"I'm sure that you understand why it's so important to keep the existence of witches in the modern world a secret. All I can really say is that you're not the only ones who want to stay hidden."

"We've studied about all kinds of natural and unnatural creatures in school, so it's not like we don't already know that they exist." Filipe slowly reasoned.

"There's a difference between knowing that they exist and knowing that they're here, amongst us."

Filipe seemed to be thinking about that, so Agent Roberts said a little more loudly, "Since we're on our way now, it might be a good time for me to tell you a little bit more about what we'll be facing."

"Do you think we'll get to see the Wudewas?" G asked hopefully.

"It's a possibility. That's as much as I can promise at this point."

"Wudewas? Like, bigfoot?" Filipe asked in surprise.

"Yes. That's who's living in the colony that we're going to help." Agent Roberts said calmly.

"I thought we were going to help some witches who couldn't adapt to the modern world. You're always hearing stories about stuff like that." Filipe explained.

"No. It's a Wudewas colony, hidden in a valley deep in the mountains. While their barrier hasn't failed, it apparently hasn't been maintained either. Modern technology has reached a point where it can breach their defenses so they need for us to secure it for them." Agent Roberts said slowly and precisely.

"Paul has studied a lot about barriers. Maybe he can fill us in on what to expect when we get there." G suggested.

"Well, yeah. I've studied about them. But just like with a lot of the spells that we study in school, I get the feeling that they intentionally leave things out of the textbooks so that no one knows the really important stuff, like how to take a barrier down or breach it if they're not supposed to."

"Just tell us what you can. It's got to be better than going into it completely blind." Agent Roberts said as he kept the majority of his attention on the road.

"I thought that you'd be telling us to hold on until Professor Everstone got us all together and told us what he wanted us to know." Paul said honestly.

"I may not know all about how witches compare to each other, but from what I've seen, I get the feeling that it wouldn't have taken too much for the people in charge to have found a group of witches with the raw power that they needed to pull this off. That being the case, if they wanted a bunch of dumb little zombies to blindly follow orders, that's who they would have brought with them..."

"Paul and I actually know someone who could arrange that... the zombie thing, I mean."

"If we *really* are going to be working on a barrier, we're going to need power, lots of it." Paul said thoughtfully, apparently not hearing his brother's words.

"The way I understand it is Dex is going to be providing that power." Agent Roberts said in response.

"I have to admit that I don't know much about Oriads. There's not a lot of information about them, so I'm not sure how all of that works." Paul reluctantly disclosed.

"Based on my limited understanding of what I've heard, it sounds like Dex is going to be the key to unlocking the power of the earth. Zanner is the one who's going to have to control that power."

"I don't know how much 'control' he's going to have, but he should be able to 'direct' or 'influence' the power to where it's needed." Paul said thoughtfully.

"That sounds about right." Agent Roberts confirmed, then continued, "But I really don't know much about what the rest of you are going to be expected to do."

"There are a few different types of barriers that I've heard of, so I can't be sure." Paul said in prelude, "But looking at who we've brought with us, I'd say that Filipe and I are going to be using the water element to try and help Zanner. Water can influence earth, so we can push while he pulls, or something like that."

"But you said that you aren't adept at using water. How's that going to work?"

"I don't know if it will. Even though I don't have a lot of power when it comes to water, I've channeled enough to be able to manipulate it. Maybe that's the ability that they need instead of just someone with a lot of raw power." Paul said thoughtfully.

"If you and Filipe are going to be managing the water, that must mean that Corabeth and I are going to be manipulating the air." G said slowly.

"That would make sense." Paul agreed.

"Even though my abilities are based in air, I haven't really done much with the manipulation of the elemental properties." G quietly admitted.

"It sounds like you two are probably going to be the backup of the backup. If Filipe and I can't handle the water, then you two are going to be called on to help us."

"There's got to be more to it than I'm seeing, otherwise they would have chosen students who had attained more of a mastery in those elements." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Yeah. When things get rolling, G's going to be using his sorcery to weave an illusion into the barrier spell. That's the big thing that he can do that none of the rest of us can. In the same way, Corabeth is going to add her 'wall of force' magic that will physically stop people from being able to get in."

"What about you and Filipe?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"If it were just me, I'd say that it had something to do with Alchemy. But since Filipe and I have been teamed up together, I'm guessing that they're going to need for us to do a charm or a curse or something like that. That's what we're best at." Paul said, not entirely certain of his own deduction.

"Again, I know very little about such things, but in all of this you haven't said anything about actually 'casting' the spell, I mean, over the entire Wudewas colony. Do you think that maybe the two of you are going to be handling that?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"I just kind of thought that Professor Everstone would be doing it, but... that would actually make sense. Filipe and I are exact

opposites in a lot of our powers, but we've been able to sync up with each other. With the spell being so big and complicated, it would make sense for us to combine our abilities to do the casting."

"The biggest thing I've ever done is making charms with you." Filipe interjected.

"It's not what we did, it's how we did it. I used my alchemy and you used your thaumaturgy to manipulate the spells to work in ways that they were never intended. We were able to complete successful spells... well, except that the charms weren't always usable when we were finished. Still, we've proven that we can manipulate and integrate complex spells and end up with something stable."

"Which sounds very much like what they're going to be asking you to do incorporating the sorcery, 'wall of force' and all the rest of it into the barrier spell." Agent Roberts added.

"This is crazy." Paul muttered under his breath.

"Since you seem to have a better grasp on the situation than most, do you think that you could come up with a more effective team to renovate an antiquated barrier?"

"Yeah. I can think of six people right off the top of my head who are more powerful with water than I am. I can't think of anyone who could outdo me at Alchemy, but I don't even know if we'll be needing any alchemy spells on this job."

"But of those six people, do you think that any of them could integrate spells with Filipe... or with anyone else, as efficiently as you do?"

"No. What Filipe and I have going on is like a lock and a key. We match up with each other. I don't know of anyone else who has established that kind of rapport." Paul said thoughtfully.

"If I'm right about this, *that's* what got you included on this mission. You might want to focus more on that aspect of your abilities and trust that Professor Everstone has thought through the rest of it."

"What about me?" G asked from beside Paul.

"What about you?" Agent Roberts automatically responded.

"There are senior students who can do a lot better illusions than I can. Why do you think Professor Everstone picked me to do this? What should I be focusing on?"

"You would know better than I would." Agent Roberts said honestly, then added, "The Professor mentioned that you consistently do quality work. Maybe that's a feature that he's looking for."

"I think that it might also have something to do with your part in our group spellcasting." Paul said speculatively.

"How's that?" G asked curiously.

"How many other sorcery students do you know who have combined their skills with witches from other magical specialties?"

"All I did was an overlay. It wasn't that big of a deal."

"You adapted your illusion to conform to what the rest of us were creating. I think that maybe it's not just that your illusions are great, but also that you have the flexibility to tailor them to coordinate with other people's spells." Paul said reasonably.

"Okay. Yeah. I can see that."

"In fact, adaptability seems to be the one thing that all of us have in common... except for Corabeth. From everything that I've heard, she's kind of a one trick pony." Paul finished hesitantly.

"It just so happens that her one trick is something that we're going to need." G added.

"Chances are that she won't pick up on it, but if she notices that she's the only one who's not learning new things, we'll need to let

her know that we appreciate her force wall thingie and really need her as part of the team."

"Is she a close friend of yours?" Agent Roberts thought to ask.

"Not really. Even though we both practice Wizardry, we travel in different circles. But she's never gone out of her way to be rude to me, so I don't want to cause her any unnecessary trouble."

"If we're going to be fueling the barrier with magic from the earth element, do you think we're going to have to convert it before we can use it for the spell?" Filipe asked anxiously.

"No one's said anything about that, but I think it was Mr. Hansen who mentioned that Zanner is proficient in natural magic. I don't know enough about it to speculate any further." Agent Roberts said uncertainly.

"We'll have to see for sure what discipline the spell is based in. I think all the barriers that I studied were based in nature, but you could accomplish the same thing in a lot of different ways. As long as we've got enough magic to fuel it and a tight enough spell, it will just depend on what Professor Everstone wants to do." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Well, there's no way it can be *based* in sorcery... and I'm okay with that. I wouldn't want to be the center of attention with all that responsibility on my shoulders, anyway."

"I don't go out of my way to be the center of things, but if it happens, I don't run away from it either. I do what needs to be done and let everyone else think what they want to."

"I don't think that I could do that." Filipe said quietly.

"If it happens, just focus on doing your job and don't worry about what anyone else thinks. No matter how things work out, people will respect that you put yourself out there and at least tried to do something. A lot of people are too afraid of what other people think to even try." Paul explained reasonably.

"He's right. Keep your eyes on the prize. Everything else will sort itself out." Agent Roberts confirmed.

"Besides all that, you're the youngest person on the team. If you weren't *exactly* the right person to do this job, they would've picked someone older. You're probably the most capable member of the team because, if you weren't, they would have chosen someone else... to *protect* you." Paul said with certainty.

"I guess that sorta makes sense... maybe." Filipe said slowly.

"You also need to keep in mind that the teachers will be there keeping an eye on things. If you have any questions, they'll be there to answer them. If you're about to make the wrong decision, they'll be right there to help you reevaluate your reasoning." Agent Roberts said with conviction.

"Yeah. But it still *feels* like they'll stand back and watch me fail so that they can give me a bad grade."

"I'm not saying that there aren't teachers who'd do something like that, but do you honestly think any of *these* teachers would treat you that way?"

"No. I guess not." Filipe quietly admitted, then quickly amended, "Mr. Bentley Brown would, but the teachers wouldn't."

"Bentley Brown doesn't matter. When this is all said and done, you guys will be heroes and Bentley Brown will be forgotten."

"How will we be heroes when no one knows that we're doing it?"

"You'll be the heroes of your own stories. It's something that you'll be able to carry with you for the rest of your lives. Other people knowing about it only causes a distraction which can prevent you from doing other, even greater things." Agent Roberts said sagely.

"I think you're right." Paul said thoughtfully, "Knowing that I did something big and difficult like that sounds like its own reward, even if no one else knows that I did it."

"Just don't make the mistake of thinking that there aren't any stakes in this. While being a hero may be nice, it's by no means a foregone conclusion. You *can* fail. There is danger and people might be hurt if you make a mistake. The teachers will be there to guide you and help you, but there's no way that they can protect you from your own stupidity if you're determined to goof around or not take the work seriously." Agent Roberts warned.

"Yeah. And if we screw up it's not just us who will pay the price. Our mistake might end up hurting the Wudewas, because we made their barrier less powerful than it should be." G said grimly.

"So what you're saying is to be focused on the job and take it seriously, but if we're able to do everything right, we'll end up doing something that we can be really proud of." Filipe said slowly.

"Yes. Exactly." Agent Roberts confirmed, then continued, "You're going to school to learn a set of skills that you'll be able to take out into the real world and make a valuable contribution. Right here, today, you're going to get a chance to see that in practice. If you've ever wondered 'why' you're forced to go to school, this is it. This is why. This is what you get out of it."

"Are the teachers paying you to tell us this?" Paul asked jokingly.

"I'm just telling you what I wish someone would have told me. I was pushed to conquer and succeed for its own sake. Every test was hyped to be such a big deal, just because it *was* a test. While I was doing it, I only had the most nebulous concept of 'why'. Learn the stuff, take the test, repeat, *ad infinitum*."

"Yeah. I know how that feels." Paul admitted.

"Well, now you're going to get a peek at the 'why'."

* * * * *

The sense of excitement grew when Agent Roberts turned left off the main road onto a dirt road, following the line of cars.

"Is it a lot farther?" Paul asked quietly.

"We'll get out and start walking in about half an hour.." Agent Roberts said simply.

"It's beautiful here." Paul said in wonder.

Agent Roberts smiled at the comment, feeling that he was probably witnessing something extremely rare, that being, Paul in awe.

Conversation was sparse as everyone fixated not only on the scenery passing them by, but also the sense of separation from all that was familiar to them.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts slowed his car and made his way to a place along the shoulder of the dirt road just past where all the other cars were stopping.

"How long is it until we're at the colony?" G asked before the car had even come to a full stop.

"That all depends on how fast we move and how many breaks we take." Agent Roberts said honestly, then added, "Remember, we can only move as fast as the slowest member of our group."

"So we just need to get our stuff out of the trunk and start walking?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Essentially, yes. But we'll gather with the group first, just in case they've come up with anything that we all need to know before we head out." Agent Roberts said before opening his car door.

As soon as he stepped out of the car, his attention was immediately drawn to the sky.

He could almost taste the rain hanging in the clouds above them, awaiting the perfect moment to release.

"Thanks for telling us about the rain gear. It looks like we're going to need it." G said as he walked to the back of the car where Agent Roberts had opened the trunk.

* * * * *

"It looks like everyone is here. Agent Fastbeck will be leading our way, so be sure to stay reasonably close to him. If you start falling behind, let him know." Professor Everstone called to the group.

"Actually, I was thinking that since Agent Roberts also knows the way, that maybe we should split into two smaller groups. I can lead the advance group with the stronger hikers and get the site settled before the second group arrives." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

"I can see the advantage of that, but are we going to run a greater risk of one or the other of our groups becoming lost if we separate?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"No. That shouldn't be a problem. But this way if someone needs to take a rest or has a particular problem with one part of our journey, it won't throw the *entire*group behind. One group can be setting things up while the other is still making their way." Agent Fastbeck said reasonably.

"How would you propose dividing our number?" Professor Everstone asked carefully.

"I was thinking that I could take Paul, G, Mr. Hansen, Miss Oaken and Corabeth... that is, if they wouldn't mind travelling at an increased pace."

"I think I'd prefer it." Miss Oaken said simply.

Corabeth nodded her immediate agreement.

"Agent Roberts can lead the second group and they won't be under as much pressure to push themselves. They can take whatever pace is comfortable for them." Agent Fastbeck continued.

"Thank you for thinking of that, Agent Fastbeck. That sounds like a reasonable way to proceed." Professor Everstone said confidently.

"Everyone on my team, be sure that you have your rain gear close at hand and we'll move out as soon as you're ready." Agent Fastbeck called to his people.

"Are you going to want to take all the camping gear with you?" Agent Roberts asked uncertainly.

"Yes. Everyone can carry their own personal gear, but we'll take the tents on ahead with us." Agent Fastbeck agreed.

Agent Roberts put down the tent that he had slung on his back.

"Paul, do you want to get this for me?" Agent Fastbeck asked over his shoulder.

"Sure!"

* * * * *

Agent Roberts watched as Agent Fastbeck's group quickly and efficiently gathered their equipment.

"I could've kept up with them." Filipe said as he walked to Agent Roberts' side.

"I agree. But it makes sense to break into two groups. I'm going to be counting on you to help me if anyone starts having trouble along the way."

"You don't have to say that. I know that I'm smaller than everyone else. I just feel bad that they didn't think I could do as good as them."

"I can understand that. But you were chosen to be in my group, so the best thing you can do right now is do your best and prove them wrong."

"I'm actually okay with being in the second group." Zanner said as he and Dex joined Filipe.

"You don't feel like your being 'picked last'?" Filipe asked him curiously.

"I don't care about that. I'm just as happy to be able to go at a normal pace and save my energy for what really matters."

"That's a good attitude to have, Zanner. I need to talk to Professor Everstone for a minute. Why don't you guys get your stuff together and we'll start out as soon as I'm done?"

"What about *him*?" Filipe asked as he looked at Mr. Bentley Brown.

"Don't worry about him. He'll manage." Agent Roberts said before walking away.

* * * * *

"Professor, are you ready for this?"

"Nearly. I have one thing left that I need to do before we leave." Professor Everstone said as he rifled through the backpack, which was sitting on the hood of the rental car.

Agent Roberts watched and waited as Professor Everstone extracted what looked like a foot long section of metal pipe from his backpack.

Before Agent Roberts could speculate about the utility of such a thing, Professor Everstone thrust the pipe out before him with one hand.

As Agent Roberts watched, the pipe began to extend in both directions and reform itself slightly.

Within the space of a minute, what had looked like a segment of pipe had become a nearly six foot long spear. While the spear wasn't elaborately decorated or bejeweled, Agent Roberts couldn't help but appreciate the craftsmanship and elegance of the ancient piece.

"Is that real?" Zanner asked as he hurried to Agent Roberts' side.

"Yes, by many definitions of the word." Professor Everstone said calmly.

"There's a lot of magic in that thing. A scary lot. It almost hurts to look at it." Filipe said as he approached more slowly.

"For those with the gift to see it, that would be true." Professor Everstone confirmed, then thought to add, "Agent Roberts, you might want to keep your distance. Trust me when I tell you that getting cut is the least of your worries from this spear."

"Don't worry. I've been filled in on the power and danger of the relics. I'll show my proper respect and be sure to keep my distance." Agent Roberts assured him.

"Now that the relic has been allowed to assume its true form, it will soon attain its full power. I am ready to proceed whenever you are." Professor Everstone said as he set the spear aside and pulled on his backpack.

Agent Roberts looked around to see that everyone had their gear on and were waiting for him to give the signal.

Mr. Bentley Brown's look of disgust was the last bit of confirmation that Agent Roberts needed that all was in readiness. Those who were prepared to take the work seriously were primed for action and ready to go. Likewise, those who were determined to be miserable, were appropriately so.

"Let's go!"

Chapter 19

Agent Roberts was impressed with the dedication and determination of his team. Although they were all aware that they weren't expected to push themselves, the entire group pressed on without complaint.

Even Mr. Bentley Brown was keeping up the pace. He obviously wasn't *happy* with his situation, but at least he wasn't whining about it.

At the first of several challenging climbs, Agent Roberts fell back to bring up the rear so that he could be available for anyone who might need his assistance.

While Dex and Filipe seemed to struggle a little, they were able to complete their climb unaided. Mr. Bentley Brown scaled the steep incline wearing his grim expression, but didn't falter. It seemed curious to Agent Roberts that regardless of the difficulty of the terrain, Mr. Bentley Brown never once released the valice that he was carrying. He never set it down or even shifted it to his other hand.

"How is everybody doing? Does anyone need a break?" Agent Roberts asked as they began their descent.

"I'm hot. Is it okay to take off my jacket?" Zanner asked without stopping.

"I think it's going to be cooler as we climb down. If you're still warm when we reach the bottom, you can take it off."

"I think it's starting to rain." Filipe announced.

"Yeah. Go ahead and break out the rain gear. From the look of it, it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better."

"It's okay to do magic here, isn't it?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That's no problem."

Zanner stopped for a moment and seemed to be concentrating as he made a series of quick hand movements, the way that one might do when they were trying to describe something that was difficult to articulate.

As soon as he was done, he looked toward Dex and said, "If you walk beside me the rain won't bother you."

"Thanks." Dex said timidly.

"Agent Roberts?" Filipe quietly asked.

"Yes?"

"I can keep the rain off you too, if you want me to."

"Thanks, Filipe. As long as it's not too much trouble for you."

Filipe moved closer to Agent Roberts' side, then did much the same as Zanner had done.

"Professor Everstone, do you need a minute to put on your rain gear?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"No need to worry. The spear is taking care of that all on its own." Professor Everstone said pleasantly. Agent Roberts noted that the Professor had been using the spear like a walking stick or a staff as they had been hiking.

Despite his reluctance to do so, Agent Roberts glanced at Mr. Bentley Brown and found that he seemed, if not content, at least no more unhappy than was usual for him.

"If we're all ready, let's go."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts could tell that they were moving at a slower pace than when he and Agent Fastbeck had traversed the same route. However, he couldn't find fault in the amount of effort that any of his team were putting forth.

He came to the honest conclusion that they were doing their best. Pushing them to work harder or move faster would only cause unnecessary hurt feelings and likely wouldn't do anything to increase their speed of travel.

"Is it a lot farther?" Filipe quietly asked from Agent Roberts side.

"We're not quite halfway there." Agent Roberts answered simply.

"How did you ever find this place, out in the middle of nowhere like this?"

"We had a map." Agent Roberts said simply.

"But I thought this place was supposed to be a secret."

"It is. The map was a secret too. When we were told that the Wudewas needed help, we were given the map so that we could find them."

"Who told you?"

"Agent Fastbeck told *me*. I can't say for sure who told him *or* who gave him the map. But even if I knew, I probably couldn't tell you."

"Was it just the two of you when you came here the first time?"

"Yes. You see, back then all we knew was that the Wudewas needed help. We didn't know what kind of trouble they were in. Once we had talked to them, we did our best to give them the help that they needed. Now we're here following up, making sure that they won't have to worry about being found out again."

"It's just hard for me to imagine you two going out here and facing that all by yourselves."

"If you heard that there was someone in trouble, wouldn't you want to do whatever you could to help them?"

"Yeah. But I'd probably need to ask someone else because I can't do that much by myself."

"Filipe. If you think about it, you'll see that that's exactly what I did. That's what you're doing here."

They walked in silence for a long moment until Filipe finally responded, "This is a lot bigger than just helping the Wudewas, isn't it?"

"I guess it depends on who you ask. I'm sure that this is just another job for Mr. Bentley Brown. I think that this will probably end up meaning different things for all of us."

"Even though I have magic, this is different. If everything goes right, now I'll know that I have *power*."

"You know the old saying about power and responsibility, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Just don't let it go to your head. Okay?"

"I'll try not to, but I'm afraid that I won't know that I'm doing it."

"Don't worry. If you seem to have forgotten, I'll remind you."

"Thanks."

* * * * *

"What's that?" Filipe asked as he pointed toward the sky.

"A bird." Agent Roberts answered simply.

"I know that. But it's big. What kind of a bird is it?" Filipe persisted.

Agent Roberts looked more carefully, then cautiously said, "Actually, I think that might be Agent Fastbeck."

"Really?" Filipe asked in surprise as Agent Roberts began to wave his arms in a grand gesture.

When the bird altered its course and started toward them, Agent Roberts called out to his team, "We need to stop here for a few minutes. There might be trouble up ahead."

The group stopped and watched as the black swan came in low, then landed directly in their path.

"Is there a problem?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

All present watched as the swan began to grow and take on somewhat humanoid features.

"No problem, only a slight change in plans." Agent Fastbeck assured him.

"What are we doing?"

"The other team arrived at the site and they're getting set up. I came back to check to see that your team is doing alright. Since it turns out that you're so close, I thought that maybe we could go directly to the barrier and then continue on to the campsite from there."

"Excuse me, but Mr. Bentley Brown and I may have some difficulty with this new plan of yours. We can't predict how the relics will react when they are in close proximity to the existing barrier."

"Just keep us updated on how things are going and we'll stop if we need to." Agent Roberts said decisively.

"Right. If it comes down to it, the group can stop for a few minutes while I go on ahead." Agent Fastbeck agreed.

"I thought you were a human." Filipe said suddenly.

"I am." Agent Fastbeck responded with a smile at him, then explained, "I'm a human who was cursed by a witch. Part of my curse makes me change forms. But we can talk more about that later, once we've taken care of business."

"Are you going to be okay to walk like that?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"It isn't far from here. I'll be fine." Agent Fastbeck assured him then looked around the group and asked, "Are we ready to go?"

After a moment to see if anyone had any objection, Agent Roberts finally said, "Lead the way!"

* * * * *

Fortunately, the rain had subsided, but from the look of the clouds, it could start up again at any moment.

"As I had feared, the Mikael Spear is reacting to the barrier. I shouldn't get any nearer until we are ready to enact the ritual." Professor Everstone warned.

"That's no problem. We're only a few minutes away from the barrier now. If the rest of you want to wait here, I shouldn't be too long." Agent Fastbeck said assuringly.

"Actually, it might be good for the Wudewas and the kids to meet each other." Agent Roberts interjected.

"How so?" Agent Fastbeck asked curiously.

"It'll give the kids an idea of exactly who they'll be helping. At the same time, it would give the Wudewas an opportunity to see more of the variety of people who are working to help them."

"I don't know how much impact it will have on the Wudewas, but since their contact with outsiders is so limited, this little glimpse of our people *might* end up giving them some sort of comfort. This way they'll be able to see that not everyone on the outside are murderous monsters intent on destroying them."

"Is it going to be safe for us?" Dex asked timidly.

"It will be fine. I visited them before and even though they might look a little scary at first, you'll be perfectly safe." Agent Roberts assured him.

"Drop your packs. You won't be needing them." Agent Fastbeck added.

Agent Roberts was only too happy to unburden himself.

Once all three boys had taken off their packs, Agent Fasbeck started leading the way.

Agent Roberts looked back at Professor Everstone and Mr. Bentley Brown one last time before following.

* * * * *

When Agent Fastbeck stopped walking, all three boys nearly walked into him.

"This is the barrier." Agent Fastbeck said as he looked back to confirm that Agent Roberts and the boys were all ready to proceed.

"I don't see anything." Dex said cautiously.

"I can see it." Filipe said quietly, then explained, "I can see the spell. Well, not all of it, but.. It's old... it's *really* old."

"That's the problem. The spell was perfectly fine at the time that it was cast, but now modern technology has developed to a point where it can breach the barrier." Agent Roberts explained.

Without further adieu, Agent Fastbeck stepped forward and slowly said, "In the bond of blood, in the bond of pain, in the bond of shared grief, in the name of Cernunnos who oversees and protects, accept the guardians of light into your sanctuary."

"That wasn't witchcraft." Filipe said nervously.

"It's just the password to let us through the barrier." Agent Roberts explained.

"No. There was magic there... I don't know what kind though. It was different. Paul could probably tell you. He's always talking about the different *flavors* of magic."

"Come on. We have people waiting on us." Agent Fastbeck said as he pushed through the branches and vines into the misty darkness.

* * * * *

The visibility was such that Agent Roberts made an extra effort to keep track of the three boys. He didn't want to imagine what they would have to endure if any of them became lost.

When Agent Roberts saw a large hulking shape moving ahead of them, he held out his arms and motioned for the boys to stop and be silent.

When the ten foot tall monster stepped forward, Agent Roberts had to fight down his natural instinct to run.

"It's good to see you up and moving around. Are you feeling better?" Agent Fastbeck asked warmly.

The beast let loose a low growl that caused a shiver to go up Agent Roberts' spine.

Agent Fastbeck laughed, then said, "You deserved every bit of that rest and more. Don't feel guilty for one minute for giving yourself time to recover."

"I'm guessing that this is the Wudewas who left here to go for help." Agent Roberts explained to the boys.

"This is Rhuru-wra. He is the young warrior who braved the dangers of the outside world for the sake of his people." Agent Fastbeck said over his shoulder, then turned back to Rhuru-wra and said, "We need to speak to your father."

The brownish-gray monster before them growled something that made Agent Roberts want to put his hands over his ears.

"No. No. It's nothing like that. In fact, we're here to reinforce your barrier so that no one can disturb your people again." Agent Fastbeck quickly explained.

Rhuru-wra snorted once, then turned and started to walk away.

When he was almost out of sight, he let out a low growl.

"He wants us to follow him." Agent Fastbeck translated.

"Are you guys okay?" Agent Roberts asked quietly as he turned to look at the three boys.

He found all three of them pale and trembling.

"If he was going to kill us, he would have done it by now. Come on." Agent Roberts said simply, as he motioned for them to follow.

"That doesn't make me feel a whole lot better." Zanner said as he started walking.

"I'm pretty sure that no one ever told me that making you feel better was part of my job description. I'm supposed to bring you back alive... yeah. I think that was about it." Agent Roberts continued and was happy to see that all three boys were following him.

"*That* was a Wudewas?" Dex asked weakly.

"Yes. That was one of the people that we're here to defend and protect." Agent Roberts said more seriously.

"*We're* supposed to protect *them*?" Filipe asked disbelievingly.

"That's the plan." Agent Roberts confirmed, then continued, "Remember all that magic and stuff that you've been learning. Here's where it makes a difference. Here's where it matters. And when you meet these people and get to know them, you'll see *why* it matters."

"This is why you wanted us to come inside the barrier with you, isn't it?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"I never doubted that you'd take the work seriously or that you would do any less than your best, but I thought that it'd be good if you actually *met* the people you're going to be protecting. It not only ups the stakes, but it will also make it more real when you look back on this, years from now. It's not some abstract concept based on what you learned from a textbook. Once you've looked into their

faces and met their families, you'll *really* know what it is that you're doing here."

"How do you know? Have you done this before?"

"Not something *exactly* like this. But when I was in the military, I saw a little action. I learned not only about helping the helpless, but also about regret. No matter how afraid you ever are, don't let it stop you from doing what you know is right. It's the faces of the ones you ***didn't*** help that will haunt your nightmares."

As Agent Roberts started to descend the series of logs that were neither stairs nor a ladder he made sure to keep careful watch on the three boys to be sure that they would be able to manage the climb.

Filipe, especially, seemed to be struggling, but Agent Roberts allowed him the dignity of overcoming the obstacle on his own.

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Once the last of them had finally settled at the bottom of the stairway/ladder, Agent Fastbeck led them toward a source of light.

The vines and branches seemed to be parted to allow them access to the lighted world.

Rhuru-wra growled low in his throat, suddenly reminding Agent Roberts and the boys that he was still leading them.

"The elder doesn't know that we're coming, so Rhuru-wra's going on ahead to tell him." Agent Fastbeck translated, then added, "Stay together."

Agent Roberts noticed how the three boys were gathered around him and said, "I don't think that will be a problem."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts noted that the day was drearier than on his last visit, but even so, it was still far brighter than it had been in the shadowy mist.

The boys were silent as they slowly followed Agent Roberts, fascinated by the variety of Wudewas who were also silent and staring back at them.

Having visited before, Agent Roberts was able to get over his initial wonder and look more carefully at how the Wudewas lived.

While primitive, their village was undeniably neat and clean. Everything in sight clearly had a purpose and was expertly crafted. He suspected that nothing was wasted, neither resources nor effort. It appeared to be a difficult life, but also a rewarding one.

* * * * *

As the group approached the large central hut, Rhuru-wra emerged and growled at Agent Fastbeck.

"Ud-wra will see us." Agent Fastbeck translated before walking past Rhuru-wra through the doorway.

Agent Roberts was a little nervous walking so near to the enormous beast.

The boys were obviously scared half out of their wits, but fortunately they were able to keep it together well enough to continue walking into the hut.

"Ud-wra, I'm sure you remember Agent Roberts. Allow me to present Zanner Sands, Dexter Mulryan and Filipe Pena. They are part of the team who will be working to reinforce the Southseid barrier so that there won't be a repeat of the tragedy that befell your people." Agent Fastbeck said carefully.

Ud-wra grunted and gave a low growl in response.

"Yes, that is correct. The ones you met before were cursed witches and vampires. These boys are witches, unfettered by any curses.

Each member of our team has a different specialty to contribute to reestablishing your barrier."

Ud-wra was silent for a long moment, then glanced in Agent Fastbeck's direction and grunted.

"I don't really know, I'll have to ask." Agent Fastbeck responded, then turned to Agent Roberts and said, "Ud-wra would like to know what the boys will be doing to contribute to the barrier project."

"I don't know all the details..." Agent Roberts said, then turned to the boys and added, "...correct me if I'm wrong."

All three boys nodded.

"Filipe will be using Thaumaturgy and combining his spellcasting skills with Paul's. Zanner will be using his skill with nature magic and Dex is an Oriad and will be providing access to the power of the earth." Agent Roberts said carefully.

Agent Fastbeck relayed the summary, nearly verbatim, then waited for Ud-wra's response.

After a long moment of consideration, Ud-wra finally gave a low growl, then made a gesture toward the door of the hut.

Without having to be told, Agent Roberts and the boys automatically started to walk out of the room.

"He wants us to go outside. I don't know what for." Agent Fastbeck said as he followed.

"Stay close to me, boys." Agent Roberts said in a low voice.

"Any closer and I'd be in your pocket." Filipe whispered in response.

Agent Roberts smiled and gave Filipe a quick hug around the shoulders as they emerged from the large hut and came to a stop.

Ud-wra took a few steps past them, then began to call out in a low, rumbling growl.

The other Wudewas in the area simultaneously stopped whatever they were doing and began to gather around.

The agents and the boys remained still and silent as nearly thirty Wudewas assembled before them.

Ud-wra let loose a lengthy growl, which while being loud, wasn't quite as frightening as some of those earlier had been.

In response, the assembled Wudewas all began to growl, more or less in unison.

Agent Roberts felt a chill go up his spine as he looked around the group and found all of them looking back. Their large, soulful eyes conveyed so many emotions that he couldn't count them all, even though he was certain that he was experiencing each and every one of those emotions with them.

At some unspoken cue, the spell was broken. The Wudewas suddenly went silent, then started to drift away, going back to whatever tasks they had been doing before.

"Ud-wra explained why we're here and asked that his people thank you for what you're willing to do for them." Agent Fastbeck quietly related to his companions.

"Can we go now?" Dex asked in a slightly trembling voice.

"Yes. We've done what we came to do. It's time to get to work." Agent Fastbeck said to Dex, then turned to Ud-wra and continued, "We will be leaving now. I just came to tell you what would be happening in the next few days. I won't be part of the party working on the barrier, so it's possible that this may be the last time we meet. It was an honor and a pleasure to get to know you and your people."

Ud-wra growled once in response, then turned to go back to the large hut.

"Goodbye." Agent Fastbeck said quietly, then motioned for Agent Roberts and the boys to follow him back to the vine covered archway filled with mist and shadows.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts purposefully held himself back so that the boys could precede him up the stairway/ladder. Although he knew it would be difficult for all of them, he was particularly concerned about Filipe. It turned out that even though it was obviously a strain on the boy, he kept up with the older boys every step of the way.

In contrast, Agent Fastbeck didn't seem to have any problem climbing in his Oskmey form. Something about his avian/human physiology resulted in a surprisingly adept climber. In fact, Agent Roberts couldn't be sure that Agent Fastbeck didn't somehow have a little bit of spider mixed up in there too.

Once they were on level ground Agent Roberts took stock of his group and found them to be in reasonable shape. The climb had been taxing, but meeting the Wudewas had made the whole trip more than worth it.

"Would you guys do me a favor and not brag *too* much about getting to meet the Wudewas?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he led the way in the misty darkness.

"Define 'too much'." Zanner said immediately.

"Just think about how you'd feel if you had missed out on something like this. Don't be a jerk and do that to your friends." Agent Fastbeck said solemnly.

"Yeah. Okay. I probably wouldn't have done it anyway. It'd feel almost like I was doing stuff to hurt the Wudewas if I did something like that. I'd be holding them up and showing them off just to make myself look more important than I really am." Zanner said thoughtfully.

"I'm glad that you understand." Agent Fastbeck said sincerely.

"The reason I wanted for you to meet the Wudewas is so that you'll know who you're trying to help. Now it's not just some vague notion. You've met them. You've seen where they live. When we start to work on the barrier, you're going to know exactly *why* we're doing it." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"This isn't something that we're doing for a grade. *This* matters." Filipe interjected.

"Yes. That's the point I was trying to make." Agent Roberts confirmed.

"You made it." Zanner admitted.

"Then enough said." Agent Roberts said with accomplishment.

* * * * *

After stepping through the barrier, Agent Fastbeck said, "I'm going to go back to the camp and let them know that you're on your way."

"Will you still be there when we arrive?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"It will probably only take you about twenty minutes to hike to the camp from here. I should be about ready to start the hike out by the time you get there."

"Well, if I don't see you again before you go, expect me to check in at the office periodically. I'd like to keep you up-to-date on how things are going."

"Thank you. I would like to be here with you for this, but that just isn't possible."

"I know." Agent Roberts said regretfully, then cracked a smile as he added, "Maybe next time."

"Maybe." Agent Fastbeck agreed before starting to walk away.

As Agent Roberts and the three boys watched, Agent Fastbeck's 'Oskmey' form suddenly became smaller, and within seconds, a large black swan was taking to the air.

"*We're* the witches. *We* should be able to do that." Zanner exclaimed.

"Each of us have our own special gifts to contribute. Agent Fastbeck has that one." Agent Roberts explained.

"What gifts do *you* have?"

Although the question could be taken as something of a challenge, Agent Roberts got the sense that Zanner really wanted to understand.

"The gift that I'm bringing is who and what I am." Agent Roberts said carefully. "I'm a human, an FBI agent and someone who is aware of other special 'people' in the world. As such, I have a unique point of view to contribute, along with specialized training and personal experience."

"I always thought that non magical people weren't special and couldn't do much of anything." Dex said quietly.

"We can all do different things." Agent Roberts assured him, then added, "The trick is in recognizing your talents and putting them to good use. I get the feeling that a lot of people get hung up on that last part."

"But that's what we're doing now, isn't it?" Zanner asked thoughtfully. "That's what you're making us do. You're bringing us out here and showing us not only how to use our magic for something that matters, but also that we have other things, like you do, that aren't magic, but are just as important."

"That's right. If you take a step back and look at it, you'll see that you weren't chosen for a single attribute that you possess, but for your whole selves. And it's not just about what you *bring* to the project, but also what you're likely to*take* away from it."

"If we were here with only witches, we might not have seen that." Filipe said cautiously.

"I think that one of the reasons that I was included was to give you that opportunity." Agent Roberts said, remembering his talk with Mr. Darroch on the matter.

"There's a whole lot more to this than fixing their barrier, isn't it?" Dex asked quietly.

"I think that the people in charge were given a challenge and found ways to make it an opportunity." Agent Roberts said simply, then quickly added, "Let's go and get Professor Everstone and Mr. Bentley Brown so that we can get this started."

"Yeah!" Zanner said enthusiastically.

***"

"Did all go well?" Professor Everstone asked as Agent Roberts and the boys approached.

"Yes. The Wudewas know what we're going to be doing and Agent Fastbeck has gone ahead to let everyone else know that we're on our way." Agent Roberts answered professionally.

"Dexter, did you feel any ill effects from being so near the barrier?" Professor Everstone asked with concern.

"No. I didn't feel anything."

"Good. That indicates that you're in sync with your element. Hopefully those of us who will be manipulating the other elements will be able to establish such a rapport."

"Have you been able to tell anything about the barrier since you've been here?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"There is a ritual that we will have to enact to divine the properties of the current barrier. All I can tell you at this point is that it exists. Thus far I have been unable to gain any further insights."

"Paul and I can see inside spells. If you think it would help, maybe we could do that." Filipe suggested.

"Yours is an incredible gift and it has much value. However, in this circumstance, you would be unable to visualize the details of a spell such as this one. The scope of it is beyond what you could possibly comprehend." Professor Everstone said seriously.

"Then I guess we'd better get going so that we can get this thing started." Agent Roberts said encouragingly, then glanced in Mr. Bentley Brown's direction.

By all appearances, Mr. Bentley Brown might just as easily have been waiting for an overdue bus. The 'put upon' expression seemed to be right at home on his face.

Once Agent Roberts was sure that everyone had their backpacks in place, he loudly said, "Let's move out!"

* * * * *

The hike away from the Wudewas barrier was conducted in determined silence.

Although the assumption had been made that they couldn't keep up and might end up being a liability to the greater team, none of them were feeling that. They were doing their best and giving it their all.

Agent Roberts couldn't be more proud of them if they had somehow arrived at the campsite before the other team.

* * * * *

About five minutes after they had started walking, the rain began in earnest.

Filipe automatically moved to Agent Roberts' side.

As soon as Agent Roberts was aware of the movement, he felt the rain suddenly stop.

After a look around, he was able to verify that it hadn't stopped raining, but rather that the raindrops were no longer hitting him.

"Thanks." Agent Roberts said quietly.

"It's part of being a team." Filipe responded.

After another minute or two of hiking, Agent Roberts checked on his team to be sure that none of them needed to stop to put on rain gear.

Dex and Zanner were walking side by side, much the same as he and Filipe were. Although he couldn't spot any indication of magic being used, he could tell from their ease of movement that they weren't being held back by the rain.

Professor Everstone was still walking, holding the spear. Agent Roberts could detect a slight transparent swirling blur surrounding the professor, which seemed to be repelling the water from him.

Mr. Bentley Brown had no such blur present, but at the same time, didn't appear to be wet at all.

"Is everyone doing alright?" Agent Roberts asked, simply for his own peace of mind.

"I don't know why I ever stayed inside on rainy days. This is great. I love how it smells." Zanner said happily.

"I've always liked the rain." Dex quietly added.

"Will it be much longer?" Mr. Bentley Brown asked impatiently.

"Just a few minutes." Agent Roberts responded in a similarly impatient tone.

As the rain poured down around them, the group pressed forward to reach their destination.

Chapter 20

As Agent Roberts led the way into the clearing, he spotted the two large tents that had been erected.

"What are we going to do next?" Zanner asked enthusiastically.

"Right now we're checking in to see how everyone is doing. Then we're going to decide what we're going to be doing next." Agent Roberts said as he approached the first tent.

"We're here!" Agent Roberts announced just before opening the tent flap.

"I'm glad you finally made it." Miss Oaken said, then quickly added, "We're going to be meeting in the other tent."

"We'll head over there now. How was your hike?"

"Wet."

"Same here." Agent Roberts chuckled, then added, "We'll see you in the other tent."

Agent Roberts withdrew, then told his companions, "Come on. I think they're waiting on us to get started."

* * * * *

"We're here!" Agent Roberts said before opening the flap on the tent.

"Why do you keep saying that?" Zanner asked curiously.

"It's just courteous to announce your presence. Since there's no door to knock on, that's the best I could come up with."

Zanner didn't respond except to follow Agent Roberts into the tent.

* * * * *

"We've been waiting on you to get here before we eat. Are you hungry?" G asked as the rest of the group entered the tent.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but smile at the boy's hopeful expression. He was finally able to answer, "I can't speak for everyone else, but I think I could eat."

"What do you want us to do with these packs?" Zanner asked seriously.

"Get out your lunches, then set your backpacks aside. You probably won't be needing them again until we leave."

"What are we doing next?" Zanner asked as he unslung his backpack.

"I think that from here on out you should be asking Professor Everstone about that. We're in his area of expertise now."

"Thank you for saying so Agent Roberts." Professor Everstone responded, then continued, "I'd also like to thank you for doing such a professional job of leading us here. I never felt that we were being rushed, nor did I feel that we were wasting our time."

"Thank you Professor." Agent Roberts said courteously, then continued, "While we're having our lunch, I think that we'd all be interested to know what we'll be doing next."

"Yes. Of course." Professor Everstone said as he began to remove his backpack.

Before he could do so, Paul quietly asked, "Professor, would you like a place to sit down?"

"As much as I might like that, I wouldn't feel comfortable relaxing while others are forced to endure these primitive conditions."

"If everyone will back up around the sides of the tent for just a minute, I should be able to make enough seats for everyone." Paul said loudly so as to be heard by the entire group.

After a moment for people to clear the way, Professor Everstone quietly asked, "Mr. Bentley Brown? Would you mind stepping back?"

Mr. Bentley Brown grimaced slightly, then grudgingly joined the others around the periphery of the tent, leaving a wide open space in the middle.

"Okay, this isn't going to be fancy." Paul cautioned, then began making a series of descriptive hand motions in rapid succession.

Upon closer inspection, it appeared to Agent Roberts that Paul's hands were each describing different things, working completely independently of each other.

After a moment of watching, Agent Roberts noticed the reactions of the others to Paul's demonstration.

All of them, teachers and students alike, were following Paul's every move. Even Mr. Bentley Brown seemed to be transfixed by the sight.

As soon as Paul was finished, a stone table and benches sprang up from the floor.

Agent Roberts instinctively wanted to take a step back, but was already standing at the wall of the tent.

The narrow table and benches were crude in their design, to say the least, but from their appearance, they seemed to be perfectly serviceable. Agent Roberts was frankly in awe of what he had just witnessed. Thus far he hadn't seen such a credible demonstration of the power of his companions. Being able to shapeshift one's self was very different from being able to 'create' stone out of nothing.

"Very well done, Paul. Thank you." Professor Everstone said appreciatively as he stepped forward to take a seat.

"Did he just combine alchemy, wizardry and numerology into one cohesively woven spell?" Mr. Bentley Brown asked in astonishment, seemingly forgetting his priggishness for a moment.

"Yeah." Paul responded, then explained, "Even though I'm still fairly new to using magic, I've got a decent power level and I'm pretty good at combining spells."

"Please, everyone sit down and enjoy your meals while we discuss the agenda for this afternoon." Professor Everstone said to those who were still standing.

"I'll be leaving as soon as I've finished eating. If there's anything I need to know about, be sure to tell me before I go." Agent Fastbeck said, directing his statement mostly toward Professor Everstone.

"To my knowledge, you are as up-to-date as any of us." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"Agent Roberts has a sat phone if you need to get in touch with me for some reason." Agent Fastbeck said seriously.

"And since we're planning to hike out each night, we'll also have the opportunity to call him when we get back to Waxell." Agent Roberts added as he unwrapped the sandwich he had purchased at the market.

"That should work well for us." Professor Everstone declared, then continued, "Once we've finished our meals, I'd like for us to proceed to the barrier site whereupon we will enact a ritual of seeing. The spell requires pure elemental power to wash away the obfuscation and reveal the true structure of the spell beneath."

"So the spell is intentionally made to be so that people can't read it?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yes. Of course. It wouldn't be much of a barrier if any wielder of magic could see the base spell and thereby know how to dispel it." Professor Everstone said frankly.

Paul slowly nodded that he understood.

"How do we 'see' the spell? Is it like what Paul and I can do?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Since I haven't been blessed with your gift, I can only speculate as to what you are able to see. But as I understand such things, what you will experience is the initial casting of the spell in its complete form." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"So it's going to be like we're in the past, like, two hundred years ago?" Paul asked cautiously.

"More like three hundred, but you will only be experiencing the spellcasting, not the events that led to it." Professor Everstone explained.

"Okay. I think I get it." Paul said slowly, then speculatively said, "The spell works like a series of instructions, telling the elements what to do. So we're not going to get to see the 'words' of the spell, but more like the structure of the pushes and pulls of the original spell on the magical flow."

"I suppose in its most basic form, that would be true. But when you experience such a thing, your mind tends to interpret what you witness in terms that you understand." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"Who are you going to have enacting the spell?" Miss Oaken asked cautiously.

"First, allow me to say that what we're about to do has its dangers, although it's by no means the most dangerous thing that we're likely to do before this is all over. This will serve the dual purpose of allowing each student who will be wielding elemental magic the opportunity to become attuned to it."

"So it isn't really necessary that they be the ones to perform this ritual, but having this experience will make it easier for them later?" Miss Oaken asked to confirm.

"Yes. It will also give us the opportunity to discover any compatibility issues, should such a thing come into play." Professor Everstone confirmed.

Agent Roberts uncapped his canteen and took a drink of water as he thought about what they were saying.

"Okay. So there's no question that Zanner and Dex will be participating in this stage of things. Who else will be involved in the ritual?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"Based on what I've read of his accomplishments, I believe that Paul will be the most suitable candidate for elemental water."

"I don't want to disagree with you Professor, but my primary elemental affinity is fire." Paul said slowly.

"I believe there are forces at play of which you are unaware. But given the ability that you have demonstrated thus far, I feel safe in saying that you should *also* have sufficient aptitude to manipulate water." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"Considering that you can manipulate elements with such ease and combine spells of different disciplines, I would have to agree with your professor. You should be a suitable holder of the chalice." Mr. Bentley Brown said confidently.

The others around the table were surprised, not only at the fact that Mr. Bentley Brown had spoken, but also that he had something remotely positive or helpful to contribute.

After a moment to get over the shock of that, Professor Everstone continued, "That leaves us with the element of air. I believe that Gwayne... excuse me, I've been told that you prefer to be called G. I believe that *G* will be an appropriate candidate to hold the Mikeal Spear and wield the elemental essence of air."

"The only training that I've had is the same as anyone else with air as a primary element. I don't know how to do anything special with it." G cautioned.

"There is no additional training to be had in the matter. Air is fluid and free and regardless of how much you try to exert your will, it will do as it pleases." Professor Everstone explained.

"Then what do I do with it?" G asked hesitantly.

"Listen to it. Understand the eddies and currents of its flow. Once you've been able to do that, you can anticipate the direction and influence the vast power that you will have access to."

"But there has to be someone with more training who can do this better than I can." G said dubiously.

"Air is constant change. To wield the power today will be very different from wielding it tomorrow. This is one circumstance where experience has little value. In wielding air, your most important attributes are the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to clearly visualize your objectives."

"I told you." Paul said with a grin at his brother.

"So Filipe and I are just going along for the ride?" Corabeth asked cautiously.

"While you may not participate in the actual scrying, your presence will be necessary when the secrets of the barrier are revealed. I also suggest that both of you pay close attention so that you'll have some sense of the level of power that you'll be accessing when your magical talents are required." Professor Everstone said gravely.

"How are you going to want Miss Oaken and I to operate? Should we stand with our students to advise them or stand back and let them figure it out?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"We will advise from a distance. Should we detect some indication that they are in danger, we will have the option of stepping in and completing the ritual for them." Professor Everstone said simply.

"I'm going to be leaving now. Good luck on your spell. Let me know how things turn out." Agent Fastbeck said as he got up from the table.

"Perhaps you should wait for the rain to die down before leaving. It's sounds rather nasty out there." Professor Everstone said with concern.

"From what I saw of the weather report, I'd bet on it getting worse before it gets better and I don't want to lose what little daylight there is." Agent Fastbeck said seriously as he started putting on his heavy-duty rain gear.

"It's not safe for you to hike back all by yourself." Paul stated firmly.

"It's not going to help anyone if you have to put off your inspection of the barrier so that someone can hold my hand all the way back to the car." Agent Fastbeck countered.

Paul made a very deliberate motion over the table and a glowing spell diagram appeared.

"Mah Zah, Ginh Zah, I need your help." Paul said firmly.

A dark gray mist began to swirl in the air, just above the spell diagram.

"It's not the most *poetic* spell I've ever heard, but it seems to work." Zanner whispered to Dex.

Within seconds, a puppy and a kitten appeared on the table before Paul.

"Agent Fastbeck needs to hike cross country to get back to his car. It's raining like crazy outside and I was hoping that you two could help him. Keep him safe and dry. Once he's safely at his car, come back to me." Paul carefully instructed.

A quick, sharp yip and meow were the immediate answers.

Paul turned his attention to Agent Fastbeck and said, "If you run into any trouble on your way back, they'll either handle it for you, or come and get me."

"Thanks Paul. I appreciate that." Agent Fastbeck said in astonishment.

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah simultaneously jumped off the table then took a moment to circle around Agent Fastbeck's feet several times. Once they were done, they took their guard positions at Agent Fastbeck's feet on either side.

"I guess we're ready then. Good luck." Agent Fastbeck said to the group before lifting the flap of the tent and walking outside.

"You can also summon *demons*?" Mr. Bentley Brown asked into the silence that followed.

"Yeah. That's actually the main thing that I do. I'm from a family of demon summoners. You got a problem with that?" Paul asked defensively.

"No. Not at all. It's just that your level of power just seems disproportionately high for someone so young." Mr. Bentley Brown explained.

"My *power* is about average, from what I can tell. If there's anything different about me it's that I can use lots of different kinds of magic at once, you know, like I did with the table and benches. None of that stuff was really high level or took a lot of magic, but most people don't know how to combine the different types of magic to do something new." Paul explained.

"He does little things in a big way." G paraphrased.

"Yeah. That." Paul said with a grin at his brother.

"And you have elemental affinities in both fire and water?" Mr. Bentley Brown asked cautiously.

"I guess so. I'm just learning about that myself." Paul said frankly.

"Have we all finished with our lunch?" Professor Everstone asked as he looked around the gathering.

No one answered verbally, but everyone began clearing the detritus of their meals off the table.

"Paul, thank you again for providing such a comfortable place for us to enjoy our meal. Would you mind dispelling the table now so that we may proceed?" Professor Everstone asked pleasantly.

"Sure. Everyone back away for a second." Paul said as he moved away.

As soon as everyone had taken a step back, Paul made a lowering motion with one hand and the table and benches sank into the floor of the tent.

Professor Everstone then took hold of the spear and walked to stand before G.

"Miss Oaken, would you help G become attuned to the relic?"

"Yes Professor." Miss Oaken answered as she hurried to G's side, then she quietly said, "You know how it is to channel elemental power from an object, like a wand? Just do the same with this. Start slow and let yourself ease into it."

G hesitantly accepted the spear from Professor Everstone, then seemed to freeze in mid motion.

"Just let it wash over you. Once you're comfortable with that, tap into the flow of power, just a little bit, and make it yours." Miss Oaken said quietly.

"Uh huh." G grunted as he stood with his eyes closed.

Agent Roberts noticed that a chilly breeze seemed to be circulating in the tent, even though the flap was closed.

"That's good. You've got it." Miss Oaken said with relief, then continued, "Now, extend yourself into the flow and let your senses interpret what you're seeing *through* the magic."

"There's too much." G said breathlessly.

"Pull back a little, then go into it more slowly. You're in control of yourself. Only take as much as you want. Don't let the vastness of it overwhelm you."

There was a long moment before G finally said, "Okay. I've got it."

"Good. Now just practice with it. Get comfortable." Miss Oaken said assuringly.

"Very good. It's just as I had hoped." Professor Everstone said with satisfaction.

"Are you okay?" Paul asked his brother with concern.

"Yeah. I got this." G said confidently.

"Mr. Hansen, would you help Zanner and Dexter establish their connection?" Professor Everstone asked hopefully.

"Yes Professor. We covered a lot of what to expect on the drive here." Mr. Hansen told him, then turned to Zanner and Dex and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Is it okay?" Zanner asked Dex quietly.

"Yeah. I'm ready. Go ahead and do it." Dex said nervously.

Zanner reached out a hand toward Dex, but stopped short of actually touching him. There was a long moment as Zanner stood frozen in place with his open palm a few inches away from Dex's shoulder.

"Let it happen. You're doing fine." Mr. Hansen said encouragingly.

"Yeah. Just give me a minute. It's so big." Zanner muttered.

"It's the *earth*." Paul couldn't help but say.

"There it is. I've got it... it's just so big that I lost myself for a minute." Zanner said as he slowly opened his eyes.

"Do you have a connection?" Mr. Hansen asked carefully.

"Yeah. It's just like you told us. Once I found myself, everything else fell into place." Zanner said confidently.

"Well done, both of you." Professor Everstone said with a smile.

"I can feel Zanner's connection." Dex said with surprise.

"How does it feel?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"Good. It feels right, like he's supposed to be there."

"Mr. Bentley Brown, would you allow Paul access to the chalice?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Mr. Bentley Brown slowly said, "In the history of The Third Grail, it is said that only those who had achieved supreme mastery of the element of water were given access to the relic."

Those around the tent held their collective breaths, awaiting Mr. Bentley Brown's decision.

"Be that as it may, this young man has impressed me. Provided that The Third Grail is used specifically for the purpose that it was requested, I will allow access." Mr. Bentley Brown said firmly.

"Thank you... I think." Paul said uncertainly.

Mr. Bentley Brown opened the valice that he had been carrying and using the utmost care, extracted a metallic cup.

The bowl of the cup seemed to be made out of silver, while an intricate golden webbing of artistic depictions of scenes, some religious, some profane, surrounded the bowl and tapered into an ornate pedestal.

"Paul. I will provide instruction for you as you need it." Professor Everstone said quietly as he walked to Paul's side.

"The spell, it's not water." Paul said as he looked at the chalice, but made no move to take it.

"What do you see?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"The enchantment on this... it's not based in elemental magic. It's... something else." Paul said slowly.

"The true origin of the chalice has been lost over the millennia. But even by the standards of the museum, it is considered a priceless relic."

It took a moment for Paul to gather the courage, but he finally reached forward and reverently took the chalice from Mr. Bentley Brown's hands.

"Let it flow over you. There's no need to fear." Professor Everstone quietly assured Paul.

"I'm not afraid. I'm just trying to understand. I see the water now, but I can sense something underneath. I can *almost* see it. If I could just get a clear look at it, I think I could understand." Paul said with difficulty.

"Perhaps it will be easier for you to see once you've established a rapport with the elemental essence."

"It's fine. I've got that. I use a rowan wand a lot. This is just like that, but with more water behind it." Paul said confidently.

"You're not having any difficulty at all?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"No. I exist in water. The water exists in me. We are one. I can feel the vibration of a distant ripple and if I choose, I can take action and cause a wave." Paul said distantly.

"I'm interested to see how you are able to manage at the barrier site. Is everyone ready?" Professor Everstone asked as he looked around.

"I *will* be accompanying you, to keep watch on The Third Grail." Mr. Bentley Brown said firmly.

"I had never considered otherwise." Professor Everstone said frankly, then walked to the door of the tent and opened the flap.

* * * * *

"How are you doing?" G asked as he caught up to Paul.

"I'm good. This isn't as hard as I thought it would be." Paul said honestly, then thought to ask, "How about you?"

"I'm a little shaky, but not bad."

"Let me help." Paul said as he took one hand off the chalice and offered it to G.

"Is that such a good idea?" G asked nervously.

"Yeah. I think it is." Paul said with a smile.

G transferred The Mikeal Spear to his other hand, then used his free hand to take Paul's.

Agent Roberts watched, uncertain if their action ran the risk of causing some sort of elemental magic explosion.

It turned out that the only outward effect seemed to be that the rain had stopped.

As Agent Roberts looked around, he could see that the rain hadn't stopped everywhere else, just on them.

As Paul and G walked, hand in hand, a sphere surrounded the entire group, shielding them from the rain.

"Something's wrong. I can feel the barrier changing." Paul said in a warning tone as he slowed his pace.

"It is probably reacting to your elemental magic. See if you can alter the magic to harmonize with the barrier." Professor Everstone carefully suggested.

"Harmonize... right." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Are you harmonizing the air too?" G asked uncertainly.

"It's reacting to my manipulation of the water. I think it's going to adjust itself, but you might want to keep an eye on it, just in case." Paul said quietly.

G slowly nodded as he concentrated on the magical sensations.

"Is there anything we need to do?" Zanner asked from ahead of them.

"Are you feeling any ill effects from the barrier?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"I can feel that it's there. That's about it." Zanner said honestly.

"How about what Paul and G are doing? Can you feel that, too?" Mr. Hansen asked as he looked on with concern.

"Yeah. Sort of... I mean, the earth is aware of it, but it's not doing anything about it."

"What about you, Dex? Are you sensing anything?"

"Everything. It's like when Zanner started drawing the power through me, I started *really* seeing the world around me for the first time."

"What about the water and air harmonics and the barrier?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"I can see all of it, but it just *is*. I don't see good or bad, right or wrong, it's like it's all spread out in front of me, but there's no before or after. It's everything as it is *right now*." Dex tried to explain.

"Are you doing okay? Do you need to stop?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"I'm fine. What I'm doing now isn't dangerous at all." Dex assured him.

"I'm fine, too. Thanks for asking." Zanner said with a playful grin.

"If you weren't, I'm sure that you would have said something about it by now." Agent Roberts said with a grin in return.

Zanner laughed, confirming Agent Roberts' assertion.

* * * * *

The group was silent as they approached the barrier.

Paul, Zanner and G stepped forward, but stopped short of touching it.

"What do we do now?" Paul asked in a whisper.

"G, I would like for you to go first. Simply make contact with the barrier and merge your elemental power into it. Become part of the barrier." Professor Everstone said instructively.

Agent Roberts watched G's expression carefully and could detect the anxiety in his eyes.

With one hand holding the spear, he reached out the other, stopping short of physically touching the barrier.

"G, are you alright?" Agent Roberts asked with concern when he noticed the bizarre alteration of G's face. All of a sudden, he appeared to be wearing clown makeup.

"He gets that way when he's going all-out with his magic. It's nothing to worry about." Paul assured him.

"How are you doing, G? Have you become part of the barrier?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Yes. It's washing over me and through me. I can feel the whole thing." G confirmed.

"Very good. Paul, would you care to try next?"

"I can't wait." Paul said with a grin, then holding the chalice in one hand, he held his other palm out toward the barrier.

Agent Roberts watched for some sort of transformation in Paul, but nothing seemed to happen.

"I'm in. I'm part of it now." Paul said in a low voice, then added with a smile, "Hi G. I can sense you."

"Hi." G said tenderly in response.

"Paul and G, when you feel Zanner beginning to join the barrier, you'll need to anchor him. The magical energy could easily overwhelm him. Take firm hold and protect him until he can synchronize his magical vibration to that of the barrier."

"What do *I* need to do?" Dex asked cautiously.

"Be prepared to break your connection with Zanner if he is unable to adapt his magic. Paul and G should be able to buy us the time we'll need for Zanner to adjust, but if it doesn't work, you're our best hope for keeping Zanner safe."

"Okay." Dex said and stepped closer to Zanner, then put a hand on his shoulder.

"Go ahead, Zanner. Go forward and unlock the mysteries of this barrier." Professor Everstone encouraged.

Zanner looked over his shoulder at Dex and gave him a quick, nervous smile, before turning his attention forward and extending his hand.

* * * * *

"Don't worry Zanner, we've got you." Paul said distantly.

"Yeah. Just relax for a minute and let everything stabilize." G added.

"Dex? Are you okay? Is it too much?" Zanner asked shakily.

"Don't worry about me. This is what I was born to do. But I can feel how much magic is flowing through you. Is it hurting you?"

"No. It's hard to describe... it's almost like it's too much, but Paul and G are keeping me stable. It's a lot, but I think I can handle it." Zanner said with difficulty.

"That is very good. Now we can begin what we came here to do. What we need is for the three of you to follow the magic to the core of the spell so that we can divine the details of the original casting." Professor Everstone said instructively.

"It's so big, I don't know where to start to look." Paul muttered distantly.

"It's right there." Zanner said simply.

"Zanner, focus on the spell and draw it closer to you. Don't move your physical body. Draw the essence of the spell to come to you." Mr. Hansen said slowly.

"Yeah. Okay. But... it's so big... and I don't know what I'm looking at." Zanner said in an overwhelmed voice.

"Don't worry about that, Zan. I'm used to looking at raw spells. If you can just hold it there, I can probably figure it out." Paul said confidently.

"Oh good. Can you see enough?" Zanner asked anxiously.

"A little closer. I've almost got it." Paul said in concentration.

"How about now?" Zanner asked, sounding to be slightly more comfortable.

"Yeah. Just hold it there." Paul said seriously, then added more slowly, "This may take me a minute."

"This is what we're here to do. Take all the time you need." Professor Everstone said assuringly.

"Thank you Professor."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts waited anxiously for Paul to start telling what he was able to sense.

"Professor, I think there's something strange here." Paul finally said.

"What do you see?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"That's what's bothering me. I'm not sure what it is that I'm looking at."

"Just try to focus on the interplay of the elemental magics. We need to see how they were woven together."

"I can see all that, but to sort them out, I need to see the root."

"If you follow one of the spells, disregarding all the others, you should be able to discover the source."

"That's not the problem. When I trace them back, I keep running into... whatever this is. It isn't elemental. I don't think it's even witchcraft. It doesn't have a demonic or angelic flavor to it either... I just don't know what it is."

"Paul, can you draw me in so I can see what you're seeing?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Probably. But why?"

"Bring me in. I've got an idea." Filipe insisted.

"Okay. Just do like we do at school, but remember to give yourself a minute to get used to the water element, too." Paul warned him.

Agent Roberts watched carefully for any indication that any of the boys were having a problem.

"Can you see it?" Paul asked in concentration.

"Yeah. It's just like I thought. That's the same magic Agent Fastbeck used to open the barrier."

"Agent Fastbeck is a normal human. He doesn't have any magic."

"He opened the barrier. He didn't break through it. He *opened* it. Look at the terms of the barrier spell. No *normal* human could cause the barrier to open, no matter what words he spoke."

There was a long silence between them, then Paul reluctantly said, "I'm not touching these spells until I know what we're dealing with."

"Is this something like the spell on the chalice?" Agent Roberts asked, then explained, "When you first saw the chalice, you said basically the same thing about it."

"Yes and no. This is the same... something else... that was used to create the chalice, but they weren't made at the same time or by the same person."

"So what we need to figure out is, what do the chalice, the barrier spell and Agent Fastbeck have in common." Filipe stated reasonably.

Chapter 21

"Mr. Bentley Brown has already stated that the origin of The Third Grail has been lost over the millennia. Since none present have any knowledge regarding the creation of the barrier, it would seem that the only course of action open to us would be regarding Agent Fastbeck." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"Can we call him and ask him to come back?" Paul asked slowly, keeping the majority of his attention focused on the barrier in front of him.

"Even though he and I both have sat phones, they only work under specific conditions. There's no way that I could get a message to him before he got back to Waxell." Agent Roberts said regretfully.

"Can your familiars bring him back?" G asked curiously.

"I can't communicate with them over a distance in this realm. If they were back in the Meayithan Realm, I could summon them, but there's nothing I can do since they're already here." Paul said regretfully.

"From the limited interactions I've had with Agent Fastbeck, I would venture to say that even if he were present, he might not be able to provide the answers we're seeking." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"Why would that be?" Miss Oaken asked curiously.

"He hasn't given any indication of an awareness of events outside of what is happening here and now. If it weren't for him being able to open the barrier, there wouldn't be any reason for us to believe that he was anything more than an average human." Professor Everstone carefully explained.

"That, and him being able to turn into a swan." Filipe added as an aside.

"And talk to the Wudewas." Zanner interjected.

"He's sounding less and less average by the minute." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"Actually, now that you mention it, I believe that you are correct." Professor Everstone said slowly, then continued, "Let's pursue this line of inquiry. What else do we know about the abilities that Agent Fastbeck possesses?"

Although Agent Roberts was loathed to reveal what might well be considered a secret, he reluctantly said, "He told me a little about that, he said that he was carrying a sliver of Aengus MacOg. From the way I understand it, that's the only reason that he can talk to the Wudewas."

"Of course! The black swan! I should have made the connection sooner." Professor Everstone said excitedly.

"What is it, Professor?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"Aengus MacOg was... or possibly is... a god. Or, at least that's how we've always referred to him and his kind."

"Are you saying that Agent Fastbeck is possessed by a god?" Paul asked dubiously.

"No. Not precisely. It's difficult to explain. The god people have been known to bestow their 'blessing' on a person. That usually entails them instilling a glimmer of their essence into that vessel to serve a specific purpose."

"But Agent Fastbeck said that he was the only person who could do it. No one else could get the 'gift' to talk to the Wudewas." Agent Roberts explained.

"I believe that his ability to change into a black swan may be at the heart of that. The legends state that Aengus MacOg also took on the form of a black swan. Perhaps Agent Fastbeck's existing ability is what made him a suitable vessel for the power." Professor Everstone said speculatively.

"If what you're saying is right, what does that mean for us here and now, I mean, with the barrier?" Paul asked seriously.

"If that were to be true, then it would mean that the unknown magic you detected is the magic of gods. It has been speculated that their magic is of another order of magnitude in comparison to ours. While we can manipulate the world around us using the power of the elements, they can manipulate the elements themselves."

"So when I see that weird magic turning into elemental water, that's *really* what's happening? Rather than calling on the water of the earth, he made his own unique water that behaves exactly the way he wants it to?"

"That is within the realm of possibility, although I should say that the god people were known to have a rather strict hierarchy, which related directly to their power levels. While Aengus MacOg might have had a hand in what was done here, I doubt that he would have undertaken such a task using only his own magic or under his own authority."

"So he was sent here by someone else?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"It is simply speculation on my part. I have no way of knowing for sure. But if the stories of old are any indication, then there may be an even greater power at play here." Professor Everstone said ominously.

"When Agent Fastbeck opened the barrier, he didn't call on Aengus MacOg to let him in, he called on Cernunnos." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"The horned god of animals. Yes, he would certainly qualify as a superior power." Professor Everstone said with a nod.

"I've called on Cernunnos to lend power to my nature spells." Paul said suddenly.

"Yes. Most calls to the god people tend to fall upon deaf ears, but when they decide to take an interest in the goings on in this realm,

something like this with Agent Fastbeck is typically the result." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"So, if we call on Cernunnos, he won't answer?" Filipe asked slowly.

"If we were foolish enough to gain the attention of Cernunnos, or Aengus MacOg, for that matter, it is unlikely that we would survive the experience. The god people do what they do in their own time and for their own reasons. They have little patience for the likes of us."

"But Agent Fastbeck calls on Cernunnos every time he opens the barrier." Agent Roberts said simply.

"The essence of Aengus MacOg calls to his superior, more asking his permission and showing respect than actually requesting him to do anything. Agent Fastbeck is only a vessel in such an interaction."

"So, we *shouldn't* call on Cernunnos when we need a nature power boost for our spells?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"The call you make opens you up to receive power from the nature of this realm. Even though you call upon Cernunnos by name, he doesn't grant you power. If he ever did, you would probably disintegrate immediately. The direct power of Cernunnos can't be diluted enough for any of us to be able to channel it."

"But a lesser god, like Aengus MacOg can put a little spark of his power in someone like Agent Fastbeck, so that he can do what needs to be done." Corabeth slowly reasoned.

"It's possible. But we're attempting to assign motives to the actions of the gods. That's a fool's errand in the best of times. If we are correct in assuming that the barrier was constructed by Aengus MacOg at the behest of Cernunnos, then we need to decide if we're going to attempt to do what we came here for."

"Can we even do anything? I mean, we can't undo 'god' magic, can we?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Before we ask if we can, perhaps we need to ask ourselves if we *should*." Professor Everstone responded reasonably.

"How's that?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Can we build on the foundation that's already here?" Professor Everstone asked simply.

"You mean, ignore the 'god' magic and just look at the barrier from the elemental forces on up?"

"We could at least do an evaluation. If it turns out not to be possible, then we can investigate alternatives."

"Yeah. I'm up for it. How about you guys?" Paul asked as he looked at Zanner beside him and G at his other side.

"I'll leave the brain thing to you. I'm just here to bail you out if you get in too deep." G said frankly.

"And I'm here to make sure you have enough power to get the job done." Zanner added.

"How about you Filipe? You wanna help me with this?" Paul asked with a grin.

"Yeah. Deciphering this is *at least* a two man job."

"Dex? Are you in? We're not doing this unless everyone's on board."

"Yes. I'm fine. I could do this all day." Dex responded with a tranquil smile.

"Okay. Then it's time to get serious." Paul said to his companions, then glanced to the adults and added, "This might take a while."

Agent Roberts looked around and noticed that everyone was focused on the boys, ready to react at the first sign of trouble.

"Zanner, I don't know how this thing's going to react when I touch it. Try to hold it in place." Paul said carefully.

"I'll be ready." Zanner assured him.

"G, if things go wrong, I'm counting on you to pull me and Filipe out."

"Don't worry, I've got your backs."

"I'm going in." Paul said before falling silent.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts watched and waited, feeling helpless to do anything if things suddenly went badly.

Paul began to mutter something that Agent Roberts couldn't quite make out.

"English, Paul. We need to be able to understand the words of the spell." Professor Everstone said encouragingly.

"...the ever flowing pure water is tasked to support those who will rise, should the first children fail. They are the enduring hope of the realm. They are the future that may one day come to pass..."

"That's very nice, but what can you tell us about the construction of the barrier?"

"This is weird. Being a barrier, I'd expect this to be all about earth, but there's a whole lot of stuff to do with the manipulation of water here. I think from the look of it, that it's bringing water in, cleansing it, then sending it back out for some reason."

"Don't allow yourself to be diverted. Seek out the initialization of the barrier."

"Zanner? Are you finding anything?"

"I can't see like you do. And even when I merge with one of the spell threads, I don't understand what I'm seeing."

"If you find anything that looks promising, let me know. I'll take a closer look at it."

"Paul, would you look at this?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"Yeah. What have you got?"

"It looks to me like this is 'water into air', but I don't know why anyone would even want to do that."

"Mist, humidity, rain... I think it has something to do with the water being pure and magically empowered to prolong life and prevent illness."

"Don't forget about the barrier." Professor Everstone quietly reminded them.

"This part is actually built into the barrier spell. It's to keep the people inside healthy. Whatever we do to update or improve the barrier, we've got to make sure that we don't mess this part up."

"Have you encountered any of the structural components of the barrier?"

"Not yet. I thought that I'd start poking around in some of the earth manipulation spells next, since it's not likely that they'd choose to use air as a foundation."

"There wouldn't be much for you to look at anyway. Air is cycled in and out, but nothing else is really happening to it except that stuff with the water." G said frankly, then quickly added, "Maybe you'll be able to see something that I'm missing."

"I'll look at it with you, but I doubt that there's anything other than that to see."

"Mr. Darroch." Professor Everstone said firmly to gain Paul's attention.

Both brothers responded in unison, "Yeah?"

"Focus on the barrier. Once we have what we came for, we may have time to investigate the other mysteries of this thing."

"Yes Professor." Paul said dutifully, then asked, "Zanner, have you come up with anything?"

"Not really. Over there, near the god magic, I saw something that looked to me almost like pillars. Maybe that has something to do with the foundation." Zanner said weakly.

"It sounds like it's worth taking a look at." Paul said simply.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts watched with concern as Paul fell silent.

All the boys were concentrating and it seemed that although their bodies were present, their minds had gone elsewhere.

"Dex, are you alright?" Agent Roberts quietly asked.

"I'm great. Don't worry. This isn't something dangerous for me."

"Paul. Tell me what you're seeing." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"I think we found what we're looking for, but this is pure nature. I haven't learned enough about it to understand the interplay of the forces at work." Paul said slowly.

"Zanner, this sounds like your area of expertise. Would you attempt to see the contents of the spell?" Professor Everstone asked carefully.

"This may be bigger than I can handle, but I'll try." Zanner said nervously.

"If it gets to be too much, I'll pull you back." Dex quietly assured him.

"Hold on. I think I see something." Paul said suddenly.

Everyone watched and waited for Paul to reveal what he had discovered.

Eventually, Paul said, "Whoever made this thing set it up to be worked on. The 'god' magic is underneath, but the nature magic is laid out on top of it so that we can get to whatever we need to and make changes to it."

"Can you interpret the function of the spell before you?"

"Maybe, but it'd be better if Zanner did it. He understands the nature magic a lot better than I do. I can see the big picture, but I get lost in the nitty gritty of the spell."

"Zanner, are you ready?"

"Yeah. And I think that Paul's right. Joining with the spell, I'm finding things right where I'd expect them to be."

"This could take a while. It looks like we're going to have to join with each of the pillars and decipher them." Paul said slowly.

"By 'we' I'm guessing that you mean 'me'." Zanner stated simply.

"Well, yeah." Paul admitted.

"If we're ever to see an end to this, we need to get started." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"Yes Professor." Zanner responded.

"The rest of you, be sure that you're listening for the spells involved in your specialty. Once we're done here, we will be discussing proposed modifications."

"Is anyone going to be writing this down?" G asked curiously.

"What we will be hearing is an interpretation. We will be documenting the procedures and concepts, but not the verbatim spelling."

"The pillar that I'm looking at has to do with the enforcement of the barrier. I'm going to tell you what I see, but be sure to ask questions if I don't explain it right. I don't know too much about this stuff." Zanner warned.

"Corabeth, step forward and listen carefully. It sounds as though this might have to do with your contribution to the barrier spell."

Corabeth moved from Miss Oaken's side and prepared herself.

What followed was incomprehensible gibberish to Agent Roberts' ears.

Everyone else seemed to be following along, but Agent Roberts couldn't make head or tail of one thing that they were saying.

When Zanner finally fell silent, Agent Roberts hesitantly asked, "Is that what we were looking for?"

"Yes. At least part of it." Professor Everstone answered, then turned before asking, "G? Were you following along?"

"Yeah. I got it. I'm just not sure what I'm going to do with it." G said frankly.

"We'll discuss that once we've explored the other pillars. Be sure to pay special attention to the sorcery components. Their modifications or possible recreation will be entirely up to you."

"Before we decide anything, I need to tell you about the modifications suggested by my technomagic teacher." Paul interjected.

"I'll be sure to remind you while we're developing our strategy." Professor Everstone promised.

* * * * *

Although Agent Roberts didn't understand a thing that they were talking about, he was nonetheless riveted by the detailed descriptions of the creation of the original barrier spell.

All of them, teachers and students alike, listened carefully and participated in the information gathering expedition.

Mr. Bentley Brown seemed to be paying his full attention to the goings on, but did not participate. Agent Roberts, for his part, kept careful watch on the boys to be sure that they weren't showing signs of exhaustion.

Although he was concerned that any of them, especially Dex, might be overwhelmed by the magical forces that they were channeling,

repeated assurances that what they were currently doing wasn't dangerous allowed him to remain in place and not question every step that they were taking.

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts?" Professor Everstone said, drawing him out of his contemplation.

"Yes Professor?"

"It had originally been my intention for us to return to the tents and discuss our findings thus far. But I have come to realize that we all might benefit from some time to digest the information that we've uncovered. Would you be adverse to us returning to Waxell and having our discussion at your home?" Professor Everstone asked carefully.

"No. I wouldn't have any problem at all with that. But how would you feel about us going to the tents and having dinner before we hike out? We already brought the food with us and besides, I wouldn't want for the kids to feel like they're starving all the way home. It might distract them from being able to think about your mission."

"Yes. Now that you mention it, I'm feeling a bit peckish myself. I could do with a bite to eat."

A rather insistant 'meow' sounded from beside the group, drawing both Professor Everstone and Agent Roberts' attention.

"Yes. They've finished. You won't be interrupting anything important." Professor Everstone said to the kitten and puppy at the edge of the gathering.

"I didn't notice that you were back. Did Agent Fastbeck make it back to his car okay?" Paul asked as he turned in place.

The cat gave one serious 'meow' in response followed by a low purr.

"Good. Give me a minute to completely withdraw from the barrier, then I'll send you back." Paul said seriously.

After a moment of looking at the tiny adorable creatures, Agent Roberts couldn't help but ask, "These are demons?"

"Yeah. They just change themselves to look like natural creatures while they're visiting our realm." Paul responded, then turned his attention to Filipe and asked, "Are you completely back?"

"I think so. It would be easy to get lost in there." Filipe said as he slowly blinked his eyes.

"I know what you mean. The complexity of the water spells is what's really baffling me. It doesn't make any sense."

"I've got the opposite problem. It's the 'lack' of air spells that's making me feel like I'm missing something big." G said frankly.

"Yeah. Every time we went into something new I kept expecting to finally find something to do with air, but I just kept on finding more water." Paul confirmed.

"At least the earth is like it's supposed to be." Zanner said as he seemed to come back to himself.

"I'm not sure if that's a good or a bad thing. With as weird as the other stuff is, the thing that looks perfectly normal makes me the most nervous." Paul said honestly.

A little bark drew Agent Roberts' attention back to the kitten and puppy.

"Why don't you show Agent Roberts what you really look like and I'll open the portal for you." Paul said with a smile at the pair.

"Your portal isn't going to interact with the barrier, is it?" Miss Oaken asked cautiously.

"No. It shouldn't." Paul said simply as he made a casual gesture toward the ground.

Agent Roberts watched as the puppy and kitten transformed into lizard creatures with bat-like wings and glowing red eyes.

"I'll see you guys later. Thanks for helping Agent Fastbeck." Paul said as a gray blur of mist formed in the center of a glowing spell diagram.

The two little demons entered the gray mist, then disappeared.

"Hold on." Paul said slowly as he held his hand out before him.

"Is something wrong?" Miss Oaken asked with concern as she moved to his side.

"I'm not sure. There's something else here. It's like a portal, but it's not... whatever it is, it's too far away for me to get a good look at it."

"Do you think it would help if you joined with the barrier again?" Miss Oaken suggested.

"No. Being connected to the barrier is what kept me from seeing it before. This is... something else."

"That's what you said about the 'god' power. Is it something like that?" Agent Roberts asked carefully as he noticed drops of rain beginning to pelt him.

"I don't know... maybe. I can't get a clear enough sense of it to know for sure. But when I opened the portal for Mah Zah and Ginh Zah, I could feel it close by... underground, I think."

"So, are you saying that this other thing that you're sensing is something separate from the barrier?" Professor Everstone asked slowly.

"Yes. That's the one thing that I can tell you for sure about it. I mean, it might 'connect' with the barrier, but it's not 'part of' the barrier. It's a whole other thing."

"Perhaps you could consider the possibilities and decide how to investigate further when we return tomorrow." Professor Everstone suggested helpfully.

"Yeah. That's probably a good idea. My brain is slagged right now. Maybe if I can look at it when I'm rested I'll be able to make more sense of it." Paul agreed.

"Then, if everyone's ready, let's go back to the tents and have our dinner." Agent Roberts said to the group, noticing that the rain wasn't hitting Paul at all.

"Paul, if you've done all that you need to with the water element, I'd like to take the chalice now." Mr. Bentley Brown said seriously.

"What? Oh, yeah." Paul said absently, then looked at Mr. Bentley Brown and continued, "Thank you. I wouldn't have been able to join with the water element and get into the barrier without it."

Mr. Bentley Brown accepted the chalice, then said, "It was my pleasure to see The Third Grail used in a manner suitable for a relic of its importance."

"Professor Everstone, do you want your spear back?" G asked cautiously.

"Yes. I can imagine that holding such power might be a bit taxing for you." Professor Everstone said as he held out his hand to accept the spear.

"It's not too bad. I mean, I could do it if I needed to. But it'll be nice not to have to try and control that thing all the time."

"If everyone is ready, I'll lead the way." Agent Roberts called to the group.

"I'll go with you." Filipe said as he hurried to Agent Roberts' side.

As Agent Roberts watched, Filipe cast a simple spell and the rain suddenly stopped falling on them.

"Thanks." Agent Roberts said with a smile, then started leading the way.

* * * * *

When they arrived, everyone automatically went into the larger of the two tents.

Agent Roberts watched curiously as the table and benches appeared, rising up out of the floor, just as they had done before. This time, however, Paul hadn't so much as lifted a finger to cause that to happen.

At Agent Roberts inquisitive look, Paul explained, "Once I've done a spell the first time, I can usually pull it back up from memory. There's some magic that doesn't work on, but it works for most of the stuff that I do."

"Be that as it may, I believe that we should enjoy our meals, then begin the hike back to the cars. Although the prospect of staying here to rest for a bit does hold some appeal, hiking out in the dark does not." Professor Everstone said as he placed his backpack on one of the benches.

"What are we going to be doing tomorrow?" Filipe asked as he rifled through his backpack to find his dinner.

"We'll discuss that once we've returned to town. I would like for each of you to ponder what we have been able to discover thus far and consider the steps that need to be undertaken to augment the existing barrier." Professor Everstone said as he set the backpack aside, then took a seat at the table.

"It would help us to know more about how other barriers are constructed and how they've been modified over time. That might give us better ideas for this one." Paul stated reasonably.

"Actually, that would likely cause more problems than it would solve. Barriers are typically engineered to accommodate not only the people they are made to protect, but also the geographical area

where they are located. Using another barrier as a guide might well cause you to neglect a major component of the barrier's security because your example did not have a need for that aspect."

"Yeah. The Brynnhollow barrier doesn't have the 'wall of force' built into it, at least as far as I could tell. The major feature of that one was the sorcery to make it look like nothing's there." G said frankly.

"That's true. In fact, it's hard to call that one a barrier at all since you can walk right in or out of it whenever you want to." Paul agreed.

"In preparation for this... endeavor, I was provided some small amount of information about the Brynn barrier. While you are quite correct about the sorcery component, there are other forces at play in that one. A normal human approaching the barrier would be disoriented and misdirected to lead them away. From what I read in the report, a feeling of disquiet permeates the air, discouraging uninvited guests from wanting to explore the area." Professor Everstone said before taking a bite of his sandwich.

"I didn't get any creepy feelings like that." G said slowly.

"We were invited." Paul reminded him.

"What was the other village like? What kind of people were there?" Filipe asked curiously.

"They're really nice people, witches like us... well, except that they've been cursed for umpteen generations. They can't use much magic and they're forced to transform into animals, even when they don't want to." Paul said seriously.

"Did you actually get to *see* them change?" Filipe asked in wonder.

"Yeah. A few times." Paul said simply between bites of food.

"I saw them too." Agent Roberts volunteered.

At Filipe's curious look, Agent Roberts explained, "After Agent Fastbeck and I came here the first time, we asked for help from the

Brynns to track down the people threatening the Southseid colony. They sent a group of people who could change into different types of dogs, to track their scents."

"Was Cain with them?" G asked quickly.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, he was." Agent Roberts responded with a smile, then added, "In fact, he was the one who acted as our guide once they had found this base camp."

"This... you mean you tracked them to right where we're sitting right now?" Paul asked with surprise.

"Yes. And to top it off, Cain and Lowell went with us inside the Southseid barrier." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"How many times have you been inside the barrier?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Three, including today." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Why didn't you take us with you?" G asked in a wounded tone.

"We all have our own jobs to do. While you went on ahead and set up this camp, the rest of us went to the Southseid colony and told them what we were going to be doing, so that they wouldn't think that they were under attack if they noticed us outside their barrier." Agent Roberts carefully explained.

"We got to go inside." Filipe said simply.

"What was it like?" G asked with anticipation.

"I imagine that it's what it would be like to travel to another realm. The mist was thick around our feet and the humidity hung in the air. It was dark when we first entered, but once we were in their village, the light seemed... blue or gray. Even though it was the middle of the day, it felt like twilight to me." Filipe tried to explain.

"But what were the Wudewas like?" Paul asked cautiously.

"They're hard to describe." Filipe said helplessly, then looked at Agent Roberts for help.

"They're pure nature." Dex said quietly, drawing all attention to him.

"How's that?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"They're beautiful and gentle, peaceful and tame,... at least, until they're not. They're so big and strong that they could turn deadly in an instant... just like the earth." Dex said slowly.

"He's right. But as far as how they look, they're bigfoots. I mean, except that most of the bigfoot pictures I've ever seen are brown and the Wudewas are more gray... but that could just be something to do with the weird light inside the barrier." Zanner rambled to a stop.

"Regardless, we've been tasked with the duty of protecting them from outsiders. Were it a group of faeries, ogres or displaced demons, our duty would be the same." Professor Everstone stated firmly.

"Why?" Paul asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, Professor Everstone finally admitted, "I don't understand what you're asking."

"I'm not disagreeing with you, but *why* would our duty be the same? I don't remember signing up for anything or swearing an oath of loyalty to anyone. Why shouldn't my feelings about the people we're supposed to protect be part of the equation?"

"Within the witch community, there are those who orchestrate things... from above. There are times when they will ask certain of us to perform tasks for the greater good."

"You don't know, do you?" Paul asked as he watched carefully for Professor Everstone's reaction.

"I don't know everything, but what I *do* know, I cannot discuss."

"Paul." Agent Roberts interjected to gain his attention.

Once Paul had turned to look at him, Agent Roberts carefully said, "The people pulling the strings got me and Agent Fastbeck assigned to help you. They are aware of the Wudewas, the Brynns, *you*, and others that I've met, but am not at liberty to discuss."

"Do you know who *they* are? I mean, do they have a name?"

"They probably do, but I don't know what it is. I was told by my superiors to go to your school and meet with your father. From my reading of the situation, your father was told to go to your school to meet with me. That's as much as I know about it." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Has everyone finished their food? We need to be going." Professor Everstone asked as he looked around.

"What about the tents? Are we leaving them here?" Paul asked as he looked around.

"Yes. And you can leave anything that you brought with you and won't be needing for the hike back. We'll be back here in the morning."

Agent Roberts noticed that Paul seemed to be looking around.

"Did you lose something?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"No. I'm just looking for a place that I can put a spell diagram. I want it to be out of the way, but I don't want it to get covered up."

"How big is it?"

"About a foot square."

"With everyone dropping their stuff around the tent, you're probably not going to find a space like that along the wall." Agent Roberts said honestly.

A smile crossed Paul's face, then he said, "I know what I'll do."

Agent Roberts watched as a glowing spell diagram appeared right beside the entry door. Although he was no expert in such things, he noticed that this one was far more complicated than the diagram that Paul had used to summon his demons.

"That's perfect." Paul said then made a quick gesture. In the blink of an eye, the spell diagram was encased in what looked like a wrapped gift box, complete with a red bow.

"I don't think anyone will mess with it now." Paul said with accomplishment.

"What if someone does?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"If someone opens the box, it will just be empty. It won't hurt anything." Paul said simply.

"Is everyone ready?" Professor Everstone asked loudly.

"Just a second." Paul said as he hurried across the tent to get his backpack.

"Agent Roberts, would you like to lead the way?" Professor Everstone asked professionally.

"I would be honored, Professor." Agent Roberts responded respectfully.

Before Agent Roberts could even think about the pouring rain outside, Filipe was at his side, enacting the spell to repel the rain from the two of them.

* * * * *

There was little opportunity to talk on the hike back to the cars, but despite the rain, they made good time.

When Agent Roberts led the way out of the heavily wooded area, he immediately went on guard.

He knew that if he attempted to speak to the distant figure that the rain would obscure his voice to the point that he wouldn't be heard.

The others were likewise on guard as they approached the solitary figure holding an umbrella and their anxiety increased when another emerged from a car.

As soon as they had reached the cars, Agent Roberts looked the man with the umbrella in the eyes and said, "Mr. Ingram, what a surprise to see you here."

Chapter 22

"I don't believe we've met." Mr. Ingram said as he attempted to shelter himself under his broken umbrella.

"Not formally, although I'm beginning to feel as though I know you. Fancy seeing you out here in the middle of nowhere after being on the same plane just this morning. Saying it's a small world doesn't begin to cover it." Agent Roberts said knowingly as he glanced around to see that the rest of the group had stopped and were gathered behind him.

"I suppose not." Mr. Ingram said anxiously.

"What do you want?" Agent Roberts asked impatiently, wanting to cut straight to the point.

"Please calm down. I'm not here to cause you difficulty..." Mr. Ingram said in a slow, soothing voice.

"Then why *are* you here?" Agent Roberts asked abruptly, letting it be known that he wasn't in the mood to be toyed with.

"There are many things that I'm not at liberty to discuss. In the near future, there is going to be an event that will require us to take specific action..."

"That wasn't anything like an answer to my question, was it?"

"Please, you won't understand the necessity of what we're doing unless you understand the stakes involved. There is a calamity on the horizon and it has been foretold that two of the children travelling with your group will be instrumental in preventing it."

"How is *your* calamity *our* problem?"

"I understand your reluctance to believe the importance of what we're telling you, but this is the one and only action we can take

that has been foreseen to lead to a favorable future. There is no other avenue open to us."

"Fine. What's this big threat that you're facing?" Agent Roberts asked impatiently.

"That's difficult to explain."

"Too bad. From what you've told us so far, if we do nothing, you'll be destroyed. Right at this moment, I'm not seeing that as being a bad thing. This is your one and only chance to convince me otherwise." Agent Roberts said, stating it as a simple fact.

"*We* won't be destroyed, but those we strive to protect may be lost forever." Mr. Ingram said carefully, obviously trying not to reveal too much.

"Again, how is this our problem?" Agent Roberts demanded coldly.

"Perhaps we could go somewhere a bit less rainy to continue this conversation." Mr. Ingram suggested as he wiped the rain from his face that his ineffective umbrella hadn't protected him from.

"If you want to go, just go ahead and leave. While you're at it, you can stop following us and being creepy around the kids, too." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"No. This is too important." Mr. Ingram said gravely.

"If you really believe that, then why don't you tell us what the hell you're talking about?" Agent Roberts asked impatiently, seeming to be on the edge of losing his temper.

"There are things that I don't know and others that I am not at liberty to discuss. We were sent to find the two boys and bring them back with us..." Mr. Ingram began to say, but was interrupted again.

"Hold that thought. Before we go any further, I think that I should probably let you know that I'm Agent Shawn Roberts with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. So naturally I'm going to assume

that when you talk about bringing the boys back with you, that you're meaning with the approval and consent of those legally acting as their guardians."

"Yes. Of course." Mr. Ingram stammered, obviously taken off-guard at discovering Agent Roberts' identity.

"Good. I thought that's what you meant." Agent Roberts said calmly, then continued by asking, "Who sent you?"

"Archdruid Highley..." Mr. Ingram answered. Although it appeared for a moment that he was going to say more, in the end he seemed to think better of it.

"I have no idea who that is, but why does he want the kids?" Agent Roberts asked firmly.

"The Archdruid has been blessed with the gift of second sight. He foresaw your arrival and arranged for me to be on your flight. When my mission failed..." Mr. Ingram started to explain.

"Why does he want the kids!?" Agent Roberts interrupted.

"He has the gift of visions and foretelling the future..." Mr. Ingram began again.

"Am I not speaking your language? Answer my question!" Agent Roberts barked.

"I don't know, alright?" Mr. Ingram snapped in return, breaking through the facade of calm that he had been trying to affect. "Jarvis told me that he had a vision of two boys, closer than brothers, one with hair white as snow, the other red like copper in the noonday sun. He said that they could restore the integrity of the protectorate before it's too late... he told us where and when to find you."

"Agent Roberts, could you hold on for a minute?" A voice interrupted from nearby.

"I'm kind of busy right now, Paul." Agent Roberts said without turning his gaze away from Mr. Ingram or his female companion.

Paul leaned in closer and quietly said, "I know, but this could be important. It sounds to me like he might be talking about another barrier."

"No. Your father would have told us if there were another barrier in the area..." Agent Roberts quietly responded, then paused before amending, "That is, if *he* had been told."

"Agent Roberts! I don't think what you're seeing is real!" Dex screamed from behind him.

"Huh?" Agent Roberts asked in confusion, fighting not to turn and see what had frightened Dex. Instead he kept his gaze firmly on the two strangers before him.

Agent Roberts felt Filipe take his hand and heard him muttering something that sounded like either poetry or some kind of frenetic chant, being chattered at high speed.

All of a sudden Mr. Ingram and his female companion were no longer standing in front of them. When Agent Roberts turned, he saw that they were now behind him, closing in on Dex and Zanner from opposite directions.

Agent Roberts became aware of a low rumble beneath his feet and before he consciously knew what he was doing, he instinctively pulled Filipe by the hand to dash across the clearing to Dex and Zanner.

"Stop right there!" An unfamiliar and impossibly low voice bellowed, but Agent Roberts didn't slow his pace until he had Zanner and Dex safely protected behind him, shielded by his own body.

The trembling of the earth seemed to intensify as cracks formed in the ground all around them and flames began to erupt.

"Professor. What do you want me to do to them?" The low growling voice demanded.

Secure in the knowledge that Dex and Zanner were safe, Agent Roberts surveyed the situation and found that an enormous beast with horns, claws and hooves was the one who had asked the question. To top it off, he was stunned to realize that the monster was wearing Paul's clothes.

"Before I answer, I would like to know if G is able to counteract their magic, to prevent another such incident." Professor Everstone asked calmly as he seemed to be surveying the situation.

"No. I'm sorry Professor. This isn't sorcery, at least, not any kind of sorcery that I've ever used." G responded, looking like an evil maniacal clown.

"It's not sorcery, it's a kind of mind control." Filipe supplied from Agent Roberts' side. "Paul and I have studied about this kind of stuff and we know how to counteract it."

"Thank you Filipe. Please do so. We cannot proceed until we have nullified whatever it is that they're able to do to us." Professor Everstone said seriously.

"Paul, if you'll do the light, I'll target it and do the enchantment." Filipe called out from Agent Roberts' side.

"You got it." The demonic horned monster immediately responded, confirming to Agent Roberts that it *was*, in fact, Paul.

A bright light formed above the clearing and Agent Roberts squinted to keep watch on Mr. Ingram and his companion.

Agent Roberts felt Filipe release his hand and was aware of him making a series of descriptive hand gestures as he began to very precisely say, "*Revealing light will burn through falseness and leave only truth. Clear from our sight that which is unreal.*"

While Agent Roberts was beginning to become accustomed to the harsh light, he could see that others of their group were looking around, trying to interpret their new reality. Mr. Hansen, Miss Oaken, Corabeth and Mr. Bentley Brown apparently hadn't been

able to throw off the mind control when they were made aware of it.

Agent Roberts chanced a glance behind him and did a quick visual survey of Dex and Zanner before asking, "Are you guys alright?"

"Yeah. They didn't get too close." Zanner responded quietly, then timidly added, "Thanks for protecting us."

"Thank Dex for speaking up. If he hadn't said something, we might not have known there was a problem until it was too late." Agent Roberts said as he focused on the two strangers before him.

"I think this is the first time I've ever been thankful that magic doesn't work on me." Dex said shakily.

"What are we going to do with *them*?" G asked as he looked at Mr. Ingram and his companion with disgust.

"Just say the word and I'll send them someplace where their bodies will *never* be found." The demonic monster that was Paul growled ominously.

"Before you do that, I'm interested to hear what prompted this action of theirs." Professor Everstone said simply, then fixed his gaze on Mr. Ingram.

"What I told you was true. We need the boys. We were told to get them by any means necessary." Mr. Ingram explained as he fought to maintain a facade of calm.

All of a sudden, Mr. Ingram's companion took off running, heading directly for the tree line of the forest.

As suddenly as she had started, she stopped, apparently running into a solid wall, even though nothing appeared to be there.

"You didn't want them leaving, did you?" Corabeth asked cautiously, directing her question to Professor Everstone.

"No. I didn't. Thank you, Corabeth." Professor Everstone said gratefully, then explained, "Although their methods may leave

something to be desired, it is *possible* that their need is genuine. We need to evaluate their claims and decide what action, if any, should be taken."

"Whatever you say, Professor." Agent Roberts reluctantly acceded, then turned to Mr. Ingram and firmly said, "Let's try this again. What do you need Dex and Zanner for?"

"Is Christine going to be alright?" Mr. Ingram asked as he looked at his companion's unmoving body on the ground.

"The sooner you answer our questions, the sooner you can take her to a doctor and find out." Agent Roberts said reasonably.

"No. Despite what they have done or intended to do, we will not withhold medical attention from an injured person." Professor Everstone stated firmly to Agent Roberts, then turned to Mr. Ingram and said more gently, "You may leave and take your companion with you to seek medical attention, but rest assured that you will 'not' be afforded another opportunity to abduct our children."

"Hold on." Miss Oaken said from the wounded woman's side. "She's not hurt that bad. She's just a big faker, probably waiting for another opportunity to attack us or make a run for it."

Professor Everstone slowly nodded, then said to Mr. Ingram, "You are still free to leave, but please realize that in doing so, you may be giving up your only opportunity to explain yourselves and possibly gain some measure of our cooperation."

"Okay. But I don't know how much more I can say than what I've already told you. Jarvis had a vision that the two boys were necessary to restore the protectorate..."

"Pray tell, just what *is* this protectorate you speak of?" Professor Everstone asked calmly.

Agent Roberts glanced around the gathering to find that everyone was listening intently. He was surprised to find that Dex and Zanner had moved closer to him, only inches away.

On impulse, Agent Roberts put his arms around Dex and Zanner to try and afford them some small measure of comfort and security after the harrowing experience of their near abduction.

"I don't know everything. Jarvis is the only one who has ever been inside. But our order has been given the responsibility of watching over the protectorate and keeping it hidden from the outside world." Mr. Ingram explained.

"It *is* a barrier! I knew it!" Paul said triumphantly.

"Perhaps." Professor Everstone responded noncommittally, then looked back to Mr. Ingram and said, "Continue."

"Jarvis has the gift of visions. He has foreseen that the protectorate will fall and those inside will then be exposed to the outside world, causing the loss of their sanctuary and their ultimate destruction." Mr. Ingram finished gravely.

"Do you happen to know what impending disaster will cause the destruction of this protectorate of yours?" Professor Everstone asked reasonably.

"Jarvis hasn't told me that. I don't know if he knows. I was only told that the boys were essential. Without them, there's nothing that we can do. It's completely hopeless."

"What would the boys be expected to do if they were to go with you?" Professor Everstone asked carefully.

"You can't be thinking of letting them go!" Agent Roberts asked in astonishment.

"I'm simply trying to determine their intentions, nothing is being decided at this point." Professor Everstone assured him.

"I was told that the boys have to be there when it happens, they have to be physically present. As far as what they're expected to do... I have no idea. That's all that Jarvis told me." Mr. Ingram finished helplessly.

"When would they be expected to do what you're suggesting?" Professor Everstone asked carefully.

"We were told to do it right now. Today. He said that our opportunity would be lost forever if we didn't act immediately." Mr. Ingram implored him to understand.

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts." Paul said quietly in his low rumbling voice.

"What can I do for you Paul?" Agent Roberts asked as he guided Dex, Zanner and Filipe to take a few steps back with him to speak to Paul privately.

"Stop and think about the timing of this. If this guy's telling the truth, then his barrier might be reacting to what we're doing to *our* barrier." Paul said firmly.

"We haven't done anything yet." Agent Roberts reminded him.

"But we're dealing with someone who can see into the future. What if their barrier and ours are connected somehow? What if by us fixing the Southseid barrier, we cause this guy's barrier to fail?"

"I seem to remember you and G talking about another barrier, surrounding Brynnhollow." Agent Roberts said in a leading tone.

"Yeah. But it's a whole lot different from the Southseid barrier." Paul confirmed.

"If that's the case, then by working on the Southseid barrier, the Brynnhollow barrier might also be at risk." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"Since we just got a good look at the magic inside the Southseid barrier, we need to do the same with the other barrier to see if we can find out if they have anything in common." Paul said carefully.

"If what you're thinking is right, it wouldn't hurt to take a good look at the Brynnhollow barrier too." Agent Roberts said with a slow nod.

"Do you think Professor Everstone will let us?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I think that if you tell him what you just told me, he might. Of course, Professor Everstone has other things to deal with right now. If he can get these people to give up on the idea of abducting Dex and Zanner, then maybe we can work something out with them."

"Even if he gets them to promise, I'm not going to change back to myself until I know for sure that they're not going to pull anymore mind tricks on us."

"Were you able to break out of their mind control on your own?" Filipe asked Paul curiously.

"Yeah. The funny thing is that I thought I was already protected from stuff like that. It should have rebounded on them. But when I heard Dex scream, I let my demon power flare to burn their spell away."

"When I heard him, I did the spell of seeing on me and Agent Roberts." Filipe said quietly.

"When Mrs. Cualla had us do that 'Seeing' charm, I didn't think I'd ever have a practical use for it. But now I might think about making one up so that I can keep it with me."

"I wouldn't mind having one of those myself. Knowing that they can command me to see stuff that's not really there is unnerving to me." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"Filipe and I can make you one. Just remind us later." Paul assured him.

"Paul, I assume that you're the source of these flames." Professor Everstone called in their direction.

"Yes Professor." Paul immediately confessed.

"I think you've made your point. Would you mind?" Professor Everstone asked as he glanced at one of the flaming chasms.

"No, Professor. I wouldn't mind at all." Paul said as he looked around the area at the gaps in the earth, spewing fire.

As he did so, the fractures in the earth seemed to disappear, leaving not so much as a scorch mark in their wake.

"By the way, just so you know, the earthquake wasn't me. I just did the fire." Paul thought to add.

"I made the earthquake." Dex timidly admitted, then amended, "Well, it was the Earth trying to protect me."

"You don't have anything to feel guilty about. You were afraid, but given the situation that you were in, you had every right to be. And as far as the Earth reacting to your fear, I have no problem at all with it. If those people had harmed you in any way, I would have wanted for the Earth to split open and swallow them whole." Agent Roberts said sincerely.

Professor Everstone took a step in the group's direction and quietly said, "Agent Roberts, the drastic actions that these people were willing to take leads me to believe in the veracity of their need. Perhaps we should go with them to investigate this for ourselves."

"Professor, we have no way of knowing who or what will be waiting for us if we go there. They could overpower us and take the boys."

"That *is* possible. But we can't just stand aside and do nothing. If these people need our help, we should at least consider trying to help them."

"Paul was just saying that, due to the timing of this, that it's possible that the barriers are somehow linked, so if we start messing with the Southseid barrier it might impact theirs and *cause* the catastrophe that they've predicted."

"I hadn't considered that, but I suppose that it could be possible."

"I was thinking that if that were the case, it could also impact the Brynnhollow barrier. We might want to take a look at that one too."

"Yes. It would be prudent to exercise the appropriate caution if there is even a possibility." Professor Everstone agreed.

"So what do you want to do next?"

"Under normal circumstances, I would agree that it would be too dangerous to go with these people. But I believe that we have enough raw power at our command to repel any attack. So long as we prepare ourselves in advance, we should be able to manage."

"Do you really think it's worth the risk?"

"If what Paul has deduced about the interconnection of the barriers turns out to be true, then it will be necessary for us to discover the properties of all three barriers before we can even begin to address the problems with the Southseid barrier. It would be foolish, and perhaps dangerous, to do otherwise."

"So what do you want to do now?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

Professor Everstone turned away and asked, "Mr. Ingram, was it?"

"Yes."

"Despite what has transpired here, I believe that you may actually need our help. If you would care to lead the way, we will follow you and evaluate that which you call 'The Protectorate'. If we determine that your need is genuine, then we will do what is necessary."

"Will you be bringing the boys?"

"Yes. They are essential to conducting our investigation."

"If the boys are coming, then you don't have anything to worry about from us. Bringing them to Jarvis was our mission."

"Give us a moment to collect ourselves, then you may lead and we will follow."

"I may need a minute. I think Christine might need my help." Mr. Ingram said as he walked to where his companion was still laying on the ground.

* * * * *

"So what are we doing?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"We need to be sure that all those with abilities are ready to use them. It is possible that these people might try to cause some sort of mischief with their mind control or illusions."

"I think that if Filipe rides with me, that we'll be alright. He's already proven that he can throw off their mind tricks."

"I would also like for Dexter and Zanner to ride with you. Given what I've witnessed thus far, I believe that they will feel most secure in your company."

"Okay. But if you don't mind me saying so, I think that you should have Paul riding in your car with you. I think that if the two of you can brainstorm along the way, that you'll probably come up with the best of all possible plans."

"Yes. He has a sharp wit. That coupled with my experience may well yield favorable results."

"What about Mr. Bentley Brown? Is he going to be included in this?"

"He will have to be. Paul won't be able to merge with the water element without 'The Third Grail'. Without Paul's observations, we won't have a complete picture of the state of the barrier. And without fully evaluating this new barrier, we won't be able to work on the Southseid barrier. If we can't work on the Southseid barrier, then there's no point in our being here at all. We might as well go home."

"If you'll talk to Bentley Brown, I'll get everyone else ready to leave."

"Thank you Agent Roberts. When we began this journey, I had no idea how valuable you would be to the project."

"Neither did I." Agent Roberts admitted with a weary smile, then guided the boys to walk with him, to where Mr. Hansen was standing, watching events unfold.

* * * * *

"We're going to be following those two back to their home base."

"Why would we choose to do something like that?" Mr. Hansen asked dubiously.

"It's a long story, but it sounds like they may have a barrier too. Their barrier might be tied to ours, so we need to check it out."

"What do you need for me to do?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"Be alert and ready to act. If you don't already have something in place to deal with their mind tricks, get Paul and Filipe to help you. From what I gathered, they can make something that will help."

"If Dex wouldn't mind, I'd like to establish a link to the Earth through him. No witch alive could cast a spell strong enough to enchant the entire Earth."

"I'm not sure that they *are* witches." Filipe said slowly.

"How do you mean?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Didn't you see how they reacted to Paul?"

"No. I was a little preoccupied right then." Agent Roberts reluctantly admitted.

"They couldn't believe what they were seeing. They were freaking out."

"If they're not witches, how could they cast that spell on us?" Zanner asked curiously.

"I don't know. Maybe they're something else, or maybe they *are* witches, but didn't get to go to school and learn about other kinds of witches and magic." Filipe said speculatively.

"I don't think it really matters at this point." Agent Roberts said firmly, then said to Mr. Hansen, "I'm going to be driving Dex and Zanner. Is that going to mess up your plan to link with him?"

"No. Not at all. I can establish the link now, while we're together. After that, maintaining the link shouldn't be any problem."

"Okay. I need to talk to Miss Oaken and Corabeth before we leave."

"Dex, would you mind if I linked to the power of the Earth through you?"

"I don't mind at all. Go ahead."

* * * * *

"Miss Oaken, we're going to be following those two back to their home base."

"We caught the gist of what's going on while we were keeping an eye on that woman. You don't have to worry about us. Their mind games won't work on us now."

"Good. I know we're all tired, but Professor Everstone feels that it's important for us to evaluate the situation before we do anything more."

"Why do they want Dex and Zanner so bad?" Corabeth asked cautiously.

"I'm not really sure about that except to say that their leader had a vision that Dex and Zanner are the answers to some problems that they're about to have."

"That's the problem with fortune telling, what you see doesn't always mean what you think it does." Miss Oaken said instructively to her pupil.

"It looks like Professor Everstone is about ready to go. Stick close to the group and be on your guard. We have no way of knowing what's going to be facing us when we arrive."

"When we started out, I didn't see the value in having a mundane human included in the party, but I can't deny that you've helped to keep the students motivated and focused. Be sure to take every precaution with your own safety Agent Roberts. We *need* you."

"All of us are needed." Agent Roberts responded before leading Filipe, Zanner and Dex to where Paul and G were talking.

* * * * *

"Are you aware of what's going on?"

"Yeah. I heard most of it. Am I riding with Professor Everstone this time?"

"Yes. I thought you two might be able to put your heads together and come up with a plan on the way to wherever we're going."

"What about me?" G asked cautiously.

"I think it might be a good idea for you to go with them. From what I gather, you're adept at making illusions. Maybe you can provide some insight into what Mr. Ingram and his friend did to us."

"That wasn't anything like the kind of illusions that I do." G said cautiously.

"Then maybe you can figure out how and why they're different. In fact, it might even be the key to discovering just who and what we're dealing with."

"Yeah. I'll get right on it." G said firmly.

"I'll fill you in on what Filipe and I have studied about. Maybe that will give you some clues." Paul said with a smile at his brother.

Agent Roberts looked around at his entourage, then said, "Let's get ready to go."

* * * * *

"What are we waiting for?" Zanner asked from the back seat.

"I'm not sure. It appears that Mr. Ingram may be having some car trouble." Agent Roberts said speculatively.

"Do you think I should undo the curse that I put on him?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"I thought you just cursed his phone."

"I enchanted the phone to bestow a curse on the person using it. The curse causes the failure of whatever technology that person tries to use." Filipe carefully explained.

"If that's how it works, then I wonder how he drove here to begin with."

"The woman probably drove." Filipe stated simply.

"And Mr. Ingram probably volunteered to drive them back since she has been injured." Agent Roberts said with a nod.

"So, do you want for me to take it off?" Filipe asked uncertainly.

"The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can get some sleep."

"Okay. But just so you know, this is one of Paul's spells. I think this will undo it, but I can't be sure that there won't be anything of it left behind."

"If it's one of Paul's spells, why didn't he cast it himself?"

"He doesn't have any talent for this kind of magic. He studies it, but he can't use it on his own. That's one of the things that I help him with."

"I don't understand. Why does he study that kind of magic if he can't use it?"

"I guess it's because he has really good ideas. Even though he can't cast the spells, if he can understand how they work, he can come up with new ways of using them."

"Whatever you did to Mr. Ingram seems to have worked. There he goes."

* * * * *

"Don't lose him."

"I'm sure that he's more worried about losing us."

"Do you believe him?"

"Yes. I think I do. If he were lying to us, I think he would have come up with a more convincing story."

"But you're still worried that they're going to try to do something, aren't you."

"They've already proven that they'll try to abduct you. But Professor Everstone is right. We need to investigate this to see if it's connected to the Southseid barrier. We won't be able to proceed otherwise."

"Who do you think they have in their colony? Do you think it's more Wudewas?"

"I doubt it. And from the way Mr. Ingram spoke, I don't think he knows either."

"Why do you think this barrier has people watching out for it when the other one was left alone?"

"The Wudewas are perfectly capable of existing in complete isolation. Maybe this group needs something from the outside and has these 'watchers' helping them get it."

"Do you know where we are?" Filipe asked thoughtfully.

"Not exactly, but I have a general idea."

"I'd really like to see it on a map."

"Why's that?"

"Because since we've been here, I've been hearing about three different barriers. Given the way things like this usually work, I'm guessing that when you look at them on a map, you'll find out that they're in a triangle."

"They'd have to be, wouldn't they?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"How do you mean?" Filipe asked in return.

"Three unique points on a map will either make a triangle or a line. Those are the only two possible outcomes. Isn't that right?" Zanner asked slowly.

"Yes. But I was meaning something more equilateral." Filipe confessed.

"Kind of like the Bermuda triangle?" Agent Roberts guessed.

"Yes. Since we're talking about magical fields of energy, it would make perfect sense if they set it up to be something like that." Filipe said slowly.

"Hold on. Let me guess at what's in the middle of 'The Kentucky Triangle'." Zanner said quickly.

"What's that?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Waxell." Zanner said simply.

After a long thoughtful moment, Agent Roberts quietly said, "Actually, that might explain a few things."

Chapter 23

"Is this even a road?" Zanner asked from the back seat.

"Barely. It's a dirt road." Agent Roberts answered, then added, "If I'm going to be staying in Kentucky, I might need to think about getting a four-wheel drive."

"What do you think the chances are that they're going to try to jump us and kill us when we get there?" Zanner asked nervously.

"I wish that I could tell you that it's not possible, but the truth is, we need to be on our guard and ready to defend ourselves. If there's anything that you can do now to prepare yourself, you should do it."

"I'm tapped into the Earth through Dex, so right now I can call on more power than I've ever had before."

"See if you can think of a few spells that might be handy to call up in a fight. If these people attack, don't hesitate to use them." Agent Roberts suggested.

"Remember that you guys are the ones that they're after. *We're* expendable to them. You don't have to worry as much about being hurt." Filipe added from the passenger seat.

"I wouldn't count on that too much. In the heat of battle, people sometimes lose their ability to reason. I agree that they won't initially target Dex and Zanner, but that doesn't mean that they'll be safe."

"I'm more worried about you and Filipe. They don't have *any* reason not to hurt you." Zanner said frankly.

Before Agent Roberts could offer any words of assurance, he saw the car ahead of him passing through a wrought iron gate.

The gate in the middle of nowhere seemed somewhat pointless, but Agent Roberts was aware that even though it wouldn't stop anyone determined to get through, it still served as a marker to establish the boundary of the property.

He slowed the car as he passed through the open gate and caught a glimpse of the cutout silhouette of a raven being the only ornamentation. The sky flashed with light for an instant, then a moment later rolling thunder could be heard in the distance.

* * * * *

"At least we don't have to hike to get there." Filipe said as they continued to thump and bump down the nearly nonexistent road.

"That's not for sure. We aren't there yet." Agent Roberts cautioned him.

"Yeah. Don't jinx it." Zanner called from the back seat.

"Are you guys all powered up and ready for battle?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"I think I'm as ready as I'm going to get." Zanner responded, then asked more quietly, "Filipe, if things get really bad, do you think that you'll be able to protect Agent Roberts?"

"Yeah. You keep Dex safe and don't worry about us. I've learned a lot since I've been working with Paul."

"Let's just hope that it doesn't come to that." Agent Roberts said anxiously.

"Is that where we're going?" Filipe asked as he pointed ahead of them.

Agent Roberts spotted the first buildings being illuminated by Mr. Ingram's headlights just as Filipe pointed them out.

"It looks that way." Agent Roberts finally responded as he noticed that Mr. Ingram's car was driving into the overgrown and seemingly

abandoned town in the middle of nowhere. There were no lights on in any of the buildings, nor were there any street lights.

Although the buildings didn't appear to be falling down, neither did it appear that they were being maintained to any measurable degree.

* * * * *

There was silence in the car as Agent Roberts slowly followed Mr. Ingram through the center of town.

Although he didn't say as much, he half expected for someone or something to jump out in front of them at any moment.

Once they were through the town, they continued on toward the last vestiges of the setting sun. The only visible structure in the distance before them was in silhouette, peeking up over the treeline that they were approaching.

"We're not going there, are we?" Filipe asked with dread.

"Actually, I think we are." Agent Roberts said regretfully.

The general shape of the silhouette made Agent Roberts uneasy as he began to speculate about what they might be about to encounter.

As they got closer, his worst imaginings were confirmed to be true.

Unlike the buildings in town, the church that they were approaching wasn't made of wood. It appeared to be built entirely of stone and the Byzantine architecture looked like something transplanted from a far different time and place.

The church was overgrown with moss, weeds and trees, looking every bit as abandoned as the town had been. However, much like the buildings in town, it didn't appear to be in such a state of disrepair that it was in danger of collapsing in on itself.

Before Agent Roberts could come up with any words of assurance for Filipe... or for himself, for that matter, Mr. Ingram brought his car to a stop.

"Agent Roberts? Have you ever seen any horror movies?" Zanner asked quietly.

"Yeah. I've seen a few." Agent Roberts admitted as he pulled in beside Mr. Ingram's car and brought his car to a stop.

"I feel like we're in one right now." Zanner said honestly.

Just as Agent Roberts opened his mouth to respond, lightning flashed behind the church's steeple. A moment later there was a rumble of thunder as the rain began to intensify.

When the burst of rain had lessened to the point where he could speak over it, Agent Roberts finally said, "Zanner. You're a witch. You've not only got magic, but you've got Dex, who can supercharge you. We're going to go out there and do what we have to do. If *anything* or *anyone* threatens you, I want you to blast the ever living *shit* out of them. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah. I got it." Zanner said as he tried to get his nerves under control.

Agent Roberts nodded once in his direction, then reached in front of Filipe and popped open the glove box.

As Filipe watched, Agent Roberts took a clamshell case out and opened it. He quickly and efficiently inserted one of the six clips into the pistol, then squirreled away the other five in his pockets.

Filipe stared wide eyed as Agent Roberts put the case away.

"Good. Then let's do this." Agent Roberts said firmly, then opened his car door.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts barely noticed the rain falling on him as he kept most of his attention on Mr. Ingram. By the time it had registered,

Filipe was at his side and the rain once again was falling away from them.

"Archdruid Highley should be inside." Mr. Ingram said as he walked toward Agent Roberts' car trying to shelter himself under a pitifully crippled umbrella.

"Let's wait for the others, then we'll go with you." Agent Roberts said as he watched Mr. Ingram's companion hurrying away from them, toward the church.

"Christine is going on ahead to let the Archdruid know that you're here." Mr. Ingram said as he followed Agent Roberts' gaze.

"Now that we *are* here, what do you expect us to do?" Agent Roberts asked firmly.

"Just come inside and speak with the Archdruid. He will let all of us know what needs to be done next." Mr. Ingram said urgently.

"Mr. Ingram, if *anyone* under my protection is hurt in *any* way, I will be extremely upset and I will hold you *personally* responsible. Do you understand me?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked Mr. Ingram in the eyes.

"Yes. I believe I do." Mr. Ingram choked out.

"Good." Agent Roberts said, then glanced around before saying, "It looks like that's everyone. Lead the way."

* * * * *

As the group stepped through the entryway and past the twenty foot high doors, they entered the much dimmer church sanctuary.

Agent Roberts stopped in his tracks and drew his gun when he spotted the shrouded figures sitting silently in the pews of the church.

As he cautiously approached the nearest one, he began to suspect that the person before him wasn't a threat. One more step made

him reasonably sure that the person wasn't alive, and might not be a person at all.

He lowered his gun, but kept it in hand as he surveyed his surroundings and counted nine other shrouded 'sculptures', either sitting in pews or standing at the back of the sanctuary.

"Do you think we can hurry up and get this done so that we can get out of here? I'd really like to leave." Filipe asked from Agent Roberts side.

"I'll do my best." Agent Roberts assured him in a whisper.

"Welcome to Nevermore." A tall thin man dressed in simple robes said as he walked into the sanctuary from a side door at the front.

"Archdruid Highley?" Agent Roberts guessed.

"Yes. Although I doubt that anyone here is impressed by my title. Please feel free to call me Jarvis, if you like." The man said pleasantly.

"Maybe later. Right now I'd like to know what you expect of us." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Jen informs me that you are beings of power, so that should make explanations a bit easier for all involved."

"How's that?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously, then felt Filipe's hand working its way into his.

"As I'm sure Milo has told you, I have been given the gift of second sight. The unfortunate truth of my gift is that I will catch a glimpse of a moment, frozen in time, and then I have to make judgements based on that. I foresaw the children, those two." Archdruid Highley said as he indicated Zanner and Dex, then continued, "But I had no way of knowing if they were beings of power or average people whose presence would set a series of events into motion. I pieced together as much as I could with subsequent visions, then sent Milo and Jen to fetch them."

"Okay. But before we get into that, I thought the people you sent to get the boys were named Elias and Christine." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"We secured alternative identities for them, so that if things turned badly, they couldn't be traced back here. Our mission is too important. We won't endanger it if at all possible. However, now that you're here I see no advantage in keeping up the pretense."

"Okay. *That* I can understand. Now, will you tell me, what is it that you would like for us to do for you?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"I'm afraid that I don't have a simple answer for that, except to ask you to wait for what is going to happen next. I'm not sure what that will be, but very soon, sometime in the next few days, something is going to happen and the boys will be the only hope we will have to avert disaster. With them here, all will be well. Without them, all is lost."

"Okay. Archdruid Highley, may I present Professor Everstone..."

"Michael." Professor Everstone said as he offered his hand.

"Jarvis." Archdruid Highley responded, then shook the professor's hand firmly.

"I think that if you two can talk, that we might be able to come up with some kind of a plan for what we need to do next." Agent Roberts said seriously to the pair.

"Yes. That sounds like a very good idea. Would you like to come with me to the parsonage where we can be more comfortable? It's a bit dank and drafty here."

"Yes. Thank you. I think we'd all like that very much." Professor Everstone said pleasantly.

Agent Roberts released Filipe's hand and gave him a slight hug around the shoulders as they followed Archdruid Highley and Professor Everstone through the side door at the front of the sanctuary.

* * * * *

After going through a few dark corridors, they exited the church and walked in the rain for a short distance before reaching a much smaller building, made of the same stone as the enormous church.

Archdruid Highley led the way inside and the group were pleased to find that the interior of the building had light and heat. It was still primitive, but not as bad as any of them had been anticipating.

"I expect that you must be hungry after your journey. I have a meat pie in the oven that should be ready soon. Please sit down and Milo will see to the food as soon as it's ready." Archdruid Highley said pleasantly, then looked at his companion inquiringly.

"I'll take care of it." Mr. Ingram, or Milo, confirmed.

"Before I begin, I would like to get an idea of how much you know about 'beings of power' as you call us." Professor Everstone said as he took a seat at the large wooden table.

"I mostly know what I was told by my father, the previous Archdruid. He used to tell me and my brothers stories about the otherworldly creatures that he had encountered or heard about." Archdruid Highley said distantly.

"So you haven't *personally* encountered such people?" Professor Everstone asked carefully.

"Well, yes. I am one. I, like my father, have been blessed with second sight. Miklos and Jengelica both have gifts that they can call upon."

"But you don't have any awareness of people other than yourselves with these gifts?"

"My father said that there were others, but due to our mission, it was important for us to keep ourselves separate from them. Those we protect are too important to be endangered by unnecessary outside contact."

"Yet you're welcoming us. Why is that?"

"Because I have foreseen that it is necessary for the boys to be here. I have not seen any indication that any of the rest of you being here or not will make a difference."

"Thank you. I feel that what you have shared with me is the truth." Professor Everstone said calmly, then added, "Now, if I may, I will tell you why we are here."

"Yes. Thank you." Archdruid Highley said hopefully, then his expression fell as he looked around at those who were standing and listening to their conversation. "I'm sorry that I don't have places for everyone to sit. I don't often have company, as you can imagine."

"Don't concern yourself with that." Professor Everstone said pleasantly, then turned in his chair and asked, "Paul, would you mind?"

"Are you sure?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Yes. We're all friends here." Professor Everstone said very deliberately as he turned back to face Archdruid Highley.

Paul waited for a moment to be sure, then pointed in front of him as he asked, "How about there?"

Agent Roberts and Filipe stepped to the right to get out of the way as Mr. Bentley Brown stepped to the left.

As soon as the floorspace was clear, a stone table and benches erupted from the floor, almost as though they had been spring loaded.

"Remarkable." Archdruid Highley gasped.

"Allow me to be frank." Professor Everstone said in prelude. "What brought us to this part of the country is the need for us to reconfigure and restore a barrier that has been compromised. It has been suggested by my associates that your 'protectorate' may be

another such barrier and that we might unintentionally disrupt it if we were to proceed without taking the properties of it into account."

"There's another barrier?" Archdruid Highley asked cautiously.

"Yes. Perhaps two. As I said, it's only speculation at this point. But if you will conduct us to the site of your 'protectorate' and allow us to evaluate its properties, I believe that it will be a significant step in preventing the disruption that you were concerned about."

"When you say that you're going to evaluate, are the boys going to be involved?"

"Yes. They are essential to the evaluation process."

"When would you like to do this?"

"I see no reason that we couldn't do it right now." Professor Everstone said simply.

"Um... Professor? Didn't he say that there's food almost ready?" G cautiously reminded the professor.

"Yes. Of course. How thoughtless of me." Professor Everstone said with an indulgent smile at G, then turned to Archdruid Highley and said, "We will be ready to go once we have finished our meal."

* * * * *

When the meat pie was presented, none of them thought that it would be enough to feed the entire group. It turned out to be more than sufficient. The meat pie was so dense that a small serving was more than enough to satisfy even a teenage appetite.

As they were finishing their meals, Archdruid Highley quietly said, "I'm not sure what your 'evaluation' is going to entail, but I think it might be best if we let those inside the protectorate know what you will be doing, so that they won't be concerned by it."

"Yes. I can imagine that a fluctuation in the barrier might be alarming to them if they weren't informed." Professor Everstone agreed.

"If you would allow it, I would like to take the boys to meet them, to explain what it is that they're going to be doing." Archdruid Highley said cautiously, watching closely for Professor Everstone's reaction to the suggestion.

"If you think it best. But I'm sure you'll understand that in light of their near abduction earlier, that we won't allow you to take them unsupervised."

"I'm afraid that is my fault. When I told Milo and Jen to get the boys, I didn't know what circumstances they would be walking into; only the time and place where the boys would be."

"I understand. If you wouldn't object, I would like for Agent Roberts and myself to accompany you as well."

"Agent?"

"Your people didn't tell you about that?"

"No. They seem to have neglected that detail."

"This is Agent Shawn Roberts from the FBI. I believe that the boys would feel most comfortable if he were to accompany us."

"I wasn't aware that the FBI was involved." Archdruid Highley said anxiously.

"Although I'm here on assignment with the FBI, I'm not reporting back to them about every detail of what I see. Someone in authority is aware of 'Beings of Power' and has asked me to do what I can to help resolve the barrier situation that Professor Everstone told you about." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"Thank you. That's good to know." Archdruid Highley said, then stood and continued, "Come along. I'll show you the way."

Agent Roberts, Professor Everstone, Dex and Zanner also stood to join him.

"I should go with you." Filipe said as he also stood and took Agent Roberts' hand.

"Would you mind?" Agent Roberts asked Archdruid Highley cautiously.

Archdruid Highley considered for a moment, then quietly said, "Let's go."

Agent Roberts gave Filipe's hand a gentle squeeze, then walked to follow Archdruid Highley out of the room.

* * * * *

Only a few splatters of rain fell on Agent Roberts before Filipe's spell went into effect.

Professor Everstone and Archdruid Highley were leading the way, with Professor Everstone using the spear as a walking stick and Archdruid Highley carrying a lantern, since the twilight had fully given way to darkness..

Agent Roberts and Filipe were next, still walking hand-in-hand.

Zanner and Dex were following closely behind and were unusually silent.

"On the drive here, I noticed the raven symbol on the gate. Then when we arrived, you welcomed us to 'Nevermore'. I take it that all of this is in reference to the poem by Edgar Allan Poe." Professor Everstone said casually as they walked.

"Yes. I think it was my father who came up with that. It was his hope that it would discourage any casual visitors that might happen by."

"I was just curious to know if there were any deeper meaning, considering how it seems to give the appearance that you're deliberately trying to be 'spooky'."

"That's the best way we could come up with to explain away anything... unnatural, that might be witnessed by an outsider visiting here. If they think that it's all part of an act or some type of production put on to scare them, then they're less likely to see us as some type of legitimate supernatural threat."

"Very smart. I can see that being effective." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"I'm sorry that you're having to walk out here in the rain. If I had known that we'd be doing this, I would have prepared something." Archdruid Highley said regretfully.

"It isn't a problem for us. I promise you."

Archdruid Highley turned and looked at the professor, then back at the rest of the group before responding, "It appears that it isn't."

"Is there anything we should know before we enter 'The Protectorate'?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Just stay together and let me do all the talking. They know that I'm the keeper of the protectorate, so they have a reason to listen to what I have to say."

"Understood." Professor Everstone confirmed, then looked back to see that the others had received the message.

* * * * *

As the group crested a rise, they found themselves looking down into a vast black nothingness. The lantern light didn't reveal what was beneath them, only that they had reached what appeared to be the lip of a basin.

Archdruid Highley led the way down a steep and narrow path into the valley and waited at the bottom for the rest of the group to reach level ground.

Once Dex and Zanner had arrived, Archdruid Highley began walking across the field.

Agent Roberts looked ahead of them, trying to see their destination, but all he could see in the meager lantern light was the vast open field before them which seemed to contain nothing but low grass.

"Remember, stay together." Archdruid Highley said as he stopped.

Agent Roberts looked around, certain that he must be missing something, but all there was to see in every direction was the slight movement of grass in the gentle rain.

Archdruid Highley set down his lantern, then raised a hand and said, "*In the days of tribute, in the months of seeing, in the years of trial, in the centuries of pain, we persevere. I humbly ask that you grant entry to one who serves. I am the keeper.*"

Filipe tugged on Agent Roberts' hand, guiding him to lean down.

"That's not like Agent Fastbeck's spell. The magic's completely different." Filipe whispered.

"So it's not god magic?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I don't think so. I don't see it like Paul does, but I can see enough to tell that it's different from what Agent Fastbeck did."

Agent Roberts nodded, then watched as a crude stone archway seemed to form into being out of nothing, right before their eyes.

Archdruid Highley lowered his arm, then smiled at the group before saying, "Welcome to Evermore."

* * * * *

The group were silent as they passed through the arch. The world they stepped into bore little resemblance to the one they just left.

The sky was clear and bright, although there was no sun in evidence.

The landscape appeared to be arid and dusty, interspersed with enormous crystals, jutting up out of the ground at seemingly

random intervals. The only vegetation in evidence was the occasional dry prickly weed or tuft of scorched grass. In the distance there were impossibly shaped mountains, defying both gravity and reason.

"Is this some sort of spatial warp?" Professor Everstone asked as they continued to walk.

"It is a special place created specifically for those who live here."

"Who created it?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Others. Friends. That's as much as I've been able to find out about them." Archdruid Highley said quietly, then thought to add, "I suppose that I should clarify that this 'pocket' was created to give *them* a place where they could live and thrive without being hunted to extinction."

"Do you really think that if people found out about them, they would hunt them down?"

"Maybe not at first, but eventually they would have to. It would be a matter of their survival." Archdruid Highley said simply, then turned suddenly at heavy footsteps approaching, causing the ground to tremble beneath their feet.

Agent Roberts gathered all three boys into his arms and fought to keep his wits about him as a twenty foot tall, vaguely humanoid monster approached on all fours.

"Bim, we need to see Kruggah. Take us to him." Archdruid Highley commanded.

The gray beast growled and snorted something that Agent Roberts took to be some sort of speech.

When the being before them finished whatever he was saying, he turned and began walking away.

Archdruid Highley indicated for the rest of the party to follow as he explained, "It appears that the person I wanted to see is currently dead, so we'll be dealing with his mate, Marklah."

"Is that going to be a problem for us?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"It may actually work in our favor. Marklah isn't nearly as suspicious as her husband. She'll be more likely to trust that our motives are benevolent."

"What are they?" Filipe asked in a whisper.

"I don't know. This is all new to me." Agent Roberts quietly admitted.

"Unless I am mistaken, I believe that what we have stumbled upon is a sanctuary for the nephilim." Professor Everstone announced from ahead of them.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what that is." Agent Roberts said simply.

"The nephilim are the children of angels and humans." Filipe said slowly.

"Long ago, when visitors from the angelic realm visited the earthly realm, they fathered children on the human women that they encountered. Unfortunately, angelic beings cannot survive in this world for an extended time. Likewise, their offspring cannot exist in the angelic realm for more than a short period."

"Why are they monsters?" Zanner asked curiously.

"That's what typically happens when angels and humans interbreed." Professor Everstone explained.

"Please stay together and remain silent." Archdruid Highley cautioned as he slowed his pace.

Agent Roberts and the boys couldn't be more 'together' if they tried.

As the group slowly moved forward, they were greeted by the sight of an enormous female... something. She was at least thirty feet tall, green-gray in color and not altogether human in form. Regardless, she was inelegantly reclined on an outcropping of rocks and crystals, vaguely forming a couch or a lounge.

The grotesque 'woman' was naked and had a baby, which was larger than a full-grown man, feverishly suckling at one of her large pendulous breasts.

Agent Roberts tore his gaze away from the hideous sight to check on the boys to find them frozen in wide-eyed shock.

"Marklah, these people have come to examine the boundary between our worlds so that you and your people can continue to enjoy glorious campaigns without outside interference."

The monster before them shifted slightly, revealing even more of herself, then responded in a low guttural growl. Agent Roberts' eyes were drawn to what appeared to be barnacles growing between her massive thighs and had to choke down the bile rising in his throat.

"No. I'm not asking you to do anything. I just wanted you to know so that if you sensed a disturbance, you wouldn't think that you were under attack."

She growled again, then gave a snort of discomfort before shifting her enormous monstrous baby to her other breast.

"We'll go now. I need to notify Novah."

Marklah barked an abrupt response but didn't show any other sign of hostility.

"Thank you. I appreciate that. We'll be going now and I will return to let you know when everything has been done."

Marklah growled her response, then turned her attention to her baby.

* * * * *

"She's going to pass on the message to the others." Archdruid Highley said as he began to follow the path that they had arrived on.

Before much more than a minute had passed, a multi-legged creature about fifteen feet tall approached from the opposite direction.

"Hey Len. It's good to see you. I'm here with some visitors so I can't stop to visit with you right..."

He was stopped by a wheezy screech.

"Sure. This is Professor Everstone and Agent Roberts. I'm still not clear on the names of the boys."

"Filipe, Dex and Zanner." Agent Roberts said as he indicated each in turn.

Another screech sounded, more quietly than the first.

"He said, 'Their names are Filipe, Dex and Zanner'." Archdruid Highley repeated patiently.

The monster screeched one last time, then scurried away.

"He told me to tell you that his name is Linnaeus and 'Welcome to Evermore'." Archdruid Highley said with a smile, then started walking again.

"You said that before. Am I to understand that the abandoned village outside the barrier is referred to as Nevermore and the secret world hidden inside is Evermore?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"That's right. I think it started as a joke, but over time it began to make sense. We call this place 'Evermore' because everyone who lives here is eternal... at least, they are as long as they stay inside. If they were to leave, they would be lost forever."

"But didn't you just say that the person you wanted to talk to, Marklah's husband, was dead?"

"Currently he is, but death is a temporary state here. No one will ever die of natural causes in this place, and those who are killed in battle will eventually return, either by way of some miraculous healing or by rebirth. At any given time, more than half of the people who live here are either dead or incapacitated, recovering from a recent death. For all I know, Marklah's baby could be the reincarnation of Kruggah."

"If she's his wife, that could make their marriage a little awkward." Agent Roberts interjected.

"I'm sure that it's a marriage of convenience to consolidate their political power. Kruggah and Marklah are two of the most powerful beings in Evermore." Archdruid Highley said offhandedly, then added, "It's best not to dwell on it. You'll find no peace in the endeavor."

"If they live forever, what do they do?" Filipe asked curiously.

Agent Roberts was proud that Filipe had the self-assurance to participate in their conversation.

"They fight." Archdruid Highley said simply, then explained, "They have glorious battles and covert manuverings to try and gain an advantage over each other so that they might one day reign supreme, even if it's only for a short time. Every day that they're not fighting is either spent preparing for the next battle or recovering from the last."

"I'm sorry but I don't see the point of doing that." Filipe said honestly.

"Not everything in the world has a point. This is how they choose to live."

"So you and your people actively work to protect their way of life?" Professor Everstone asked slowly.

"We work to protect their existence. Good or bad, right or wrong, we believe that they deserve to exist." Archdruid Highley said passionately.

"Given that they're contained and not doing harm to anyone outside this 'protectorate' of theirs, I suppose that it *is* a humane solution to the problem of what to do with them." Professor Everstone said consideringly.

"It is possible that the day may come when the world will need the nephilim. Until that day comes, we will continue to shelter and protect them."

"To that end, my team and I will evaluate your barrier and do all in our power to make sure that your charges are kept safe from harm... and from discovery."

"I should warn you that my visions are *never* wrong. The boys, Zanner and Dex, *will* be essential to the survival of the protectorate in the coming days." Archdruid Highley said firmly.

"Of that I have no doubt. As soon as we're out of this constructed world and back in our own reality, we can begin our evaluation so that we can determine just what needs to be done to set everything right in the long term." Professor Everstone said professionally.

"If that's all you're waiting on, then allow me..." Archdruid Highley said as he stepped up to the arch and raised a hand dramatically.

As soon as he did, Filipe took Agent Roberts' hand again and held it firmly.

Agent Roberts wasn't sure what had spooked Filipe, but didn't hesitate to respond by gripping Filipe's hand to assure him that he was safe and secure.

The view through the arch swirled and changed and eventually resolved into darkness and the sound of pattering rain.

"Is it okay if I make us some light?" Filipe asked just loudly enough for Professor Everstone to hear him.

"Yes. I would appreciate that, Filipe." Professor Everstone responded with a smile.

"Do you want to help me Zanner?" Filipe asked as he briefly let go of Agent Roberts' hand.

"Sure. What do you want me to do?"

"I was thinking that if you could spread some fairy lights ahead of us, I could do fireballs that will move with us." Filipe said seriously.

"That's a good idea. I could do either one of those, but I don't know if I could keep up with them both at once."

Filipe quickly gestured and created three floating fireballs, then returned to holding Agent Roberts' hand.

"Are you alright, Filipe?" Agent Roberts asked quietly.

"Yeah. But I think I figured out that guy's magic. I mean, how he opened the barrier."

"Oh? How's that?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"That magic he used, I think it was probably angelic."

"Do you think *he's* a nephilim?"

"No. I think he has the same thing that Agent Fastbeck does. I think that he's got something like an enchantment that allows him to open the barrier and talk to the people inside it, except that his was given by an angel instead of by a god."

Once they were fully out of the barrier, Archdruid Highley picked up his darkened lantern, then began to lead the way back across the wide open field with specks of fairy light Illuminating his path.

Chapter 24

The climb up the wet narrow path was a bit troublesome, but the rest of their walk was pleasant, mostly due to the spectacle of the fairy lights.

As Agent Roberts walked into the main room of the parsonage, he overheard G saying, "Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, fifteen-six, fifteen-eight, a pair makes ten and a pair makes twelve."

Agent Roberts puzzled over the strange rhythmic words and moved closer to the table to see what G was doing.

He recognized that the small wooden board with two differently colored sets of pegs was a cribbage board, although he knew nothing about how to play the game.

"Does anyone have anything to discuss before we begin our evaluation?" Professor Everstone asked seriously as he watched G advancing a peg along the game board.

"Do you want to put this away or try to finish it later?" G asked Jen curiously.

"Well, since I'm one turn away from being double skunked, I'm okay with declaring you the winner." Jengellica said sourly.

"Then I guess we're ready." G said happily.

"Make any preparations that you need to, then we'll be going."

"Where's your bathroom?" Filipe asked Archdruid Highley urgently.

"Out the side door, right there, then follow the path." The Archdruid responded with a gesture to his left.

"Thanks!" Filipe said quickly before dashing out of the room.

"Mr. Bentley Brown, would you mind allowing Paul to hold the chalice so that he can have a chance to acclimate to it before we begin?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"That's probably wise." Mr. Bentley Brown said as he set his satchel on the table.

"G, are you ready to take up the spear again?" Professor Everstone asked as he walked to G's side.

"I can if you want, but isn't it Corabeth's turn yet?"

"You were chosen to be teammates due to your complimentary abilities, not your *identical* abilities."

"I think what he's trying to tell you is that I suck at manipulating air." Corabeth said frankly.

"Actually, I was saying that each of us has a part to play for which we are best suited. That's why we were chosen."

"I wasn't complaining. I just didn't want to hog all the glory." G said simply as he accepted the spear from Professor Everstone.

"The scope of this project has grown far beyond my initial expectations. If things turn out to be as they appear, there should be sufficient glory for all involved, that is, if you're the type for whom such things matter."

Agent Roberts moved a little closer to hear the professor's words, concerned by his darker tone.

"Our team was assembled for the express purpose of evaluating and renovating a barrier that had been compromised. Now it appears that the scope of the project may have expanded to include three interconnected, radically different barriers. Had this been our mission from the beginning, other decisions would most likely have been made."

"So what you're saying is that you don't think that we can do it?" G paraphrased.

"It won't be possible to make that determination until we have completed our evaluations. I am simply saying that if Mr. Darroch, or those who called upon him, had initially been approached with this scenario, I believe that they might have made different choices."

"But we're not giving up?" G asked cautiously.

"No. We will complete our evaluation. Until we encounter an insurmountable problem, we will continue on as originally planned."

"Professor, I have a sat phone. If you decide that we need more help, just let me know and I can call Mr. Darroch." Agent Roberts offered.

"Again, no such determination can be made until we've completed all the evaluations."

"Agent Roberts, I left the lights going in case you need to use the bathroom." Filipe said as he approached from the side door.

"Thank you Filipe." Agent Roberts said appreciatively, then said to the others he had been talking to, "Excuse me."

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts stepped out the side door, he couldn't help but smile at the fog of fairy lights surrounding the path.

He nearly laughed when he stepped into the outhouse.

The twinkling specks of light transformed the rather disgusting reality of the outhouse into something magical and whimsical.

Having a moment alone allowed Agent Roberts to reflect on the situation that he found himself in.

When he had started his career path with the FBI he had assumed that he would be doing investigative work that was somewhat varied and occasionally dangerous.

In his wildest dreams, there was no way that he could have ever imagined the situation that he currently found himself in.

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts returned to the parsonage, it was obvious that everyone was ready to leave.

"Is there anything else we need to do to prepare before we go?" Agent Roberts asked into the silence that preceded him.

"Paul and G are each acclimating to their relics. All that is left is to conduct the evaluation."

"Archdruid Highly?" Milo asked timidly.

"Yes?"

"May Jen and I accompany you?"

"Only if the professor has no objection."

Agent Roberts moved slightly nearer to Professor Everstone and tried to establish eye contact with him.

Professor Everstone glanced in his direction, then to Archdruid Highley and Milo before responding, "You may accompany us if you like, but please take care not to distract the students or disrupt their assessment."

"I'll be sure to keep everyone who is not participating out of your way." Agent Roberts said firmly, letting it be known with his tone of voice that he would take his duty seriously.

"Thank you Agent Roberts. That will be much appreciated." Professor Everstone said cordially.

With that being established in front of everyone, Agent Roberts felt adequately empowered to do his job.

* * * * *

Without offering or being asked, Zanner and Filipe once again created fairy lights and fireballs to light the way for the group.

Agent Roberts noticed when the light rain stopped falling on him and a moment later when Filipe's hand worked its way into his.

"I want you to be able to see what's real so that you can protect us." Filipe said quietly as they walked.

"Thank you Filipe." Agent Roberts said in a similar quiet tone, then added, "When I was assigned to do this job I didn't understand why they included me. But from what I've seen so far, this group *needs* us to watch out for them so that they can be free to take care of their business."

"Everyone. Watch your step. This next part is a bit steep." Professor Everstone warned from ahead of them.

The members of the group were silent as they began the trek down the steep path into the basin.

When the last of them had reached level ground, Professor Everstone called out, "G, Paul, and Zanner, reach out through your elements and find the edge of the barrier."

"Shouldn't we go over there to where the entrance is?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Given the properties of folded space, that manifestation very likely isn't the edge of the barrier. Disregard that and find the edge of the *actual* barrier in our space." Professor Everstone said instructively.

"Over here." Dex said to Zanner quietly as he began to lead him away.

Agent Roberts watched as Paul seemed to be frozen in place, focused on the chalice in his hands.

He couldn't help but wonder what Paul was seeing.

"Got it!" G announced, then started walking toward where Zanner and Dex had gone.

"Professor? I can sense the created water from the other barrier... the 'god water'." Paul said carefully.

"What can you tell me about it?" Professor Everstone asked in a leading tone.

"Not much. But it's the same water. It's from there. It has the same 'flavor'."

"Disregard that for a moment and see if you can make contact with the barrier. We need to get this evaluation started."

"Yes Professor." Paul said, then began to walk toward where Zanner, Dex and G had gone.

The rest of the group automatically followed.

* * * * *

To Agent Roberts' eyes, the three boys were lined up, each with one hand outstretched. They were well away from the location where the stone arch had appeared.

"Professor, there's angelic magic here." Paul said cautiously.

"Yes. That would stand to reason." Professor Everstone calmly responded.

"Angelic magic is poisonous to me. I'm not going to be able to join with the other spells that are in here."

"Do you need to withdraw? If so, Filipe can attempt to investigate this, with your guidance."

"As long as I keep myself within the water, I'll be fine. But if you need someone to look more closely at another element, you'll probably need to bring Filipe in."

"Understood. Just be sure to withdraw as soon as you notice any ill effects."

"There's not much water to look at. It comes in, it deploys, and it flows out. It isn't processed here at all. I think that's more proof that this barrier is connected to the Southseid barrier."

"What about you, G? What do you see?"

"Just about the same as the Southseid barrier, kind of like what Paul was saying. The air comes in, it's used, then it goes away. Nothing's really happening to it while it's here."

"Which might suggest that the Brynnhollow barrier takes on that function." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"I've got more than enough earth element here for everyone. This could take a while to get through." Zanner announced.

"Is it more than you encountered at the last barrier?" Professor Everstone asked carefully.

"Yeah. A whole lot more." Zanner said gravely.

"G and Paul, why don't you go through your elements and organize your thoughts while Zanner starts to chip away at his monumental task?"

"Remember that Filipe can read spells outside his specialty. If you see that it's starting to be too much, he can take some of the pressure off Zanner."

"Yes. Thank you. I will keep that in mind."

"Are you ready for me to start?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Proceed."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts half-listened to Zanner as he fought to keep the majority of his attention on those from outside their party.

By virtue of having been with them longer, Mr. Bentley Brown had attained a position of, if not *trust*, at least resigned acceptance.

Archdruid Highley wasn't exactly trusted, but Agent Roberts got the sense that he was sincere in his beliefs and was stating his motives to the best of his ability.

The other two, Milo and Jen, were more of a mystery to him. Both of them had displayed their fanatical devotion to Archdruid Highley and their willingness to perform illegal acts on his behalf. But even so, Agent Roberts couldn't be entirely sure of their motivations. He could easily construct more than one scenario where either or both of them might betray or otherwise endanger the group.

Apparently, from the hand clasped in his, Filipe didn't trust them either.

"How long do you think this is going to take?" Filipe asked quietly.

"You would probably know better than I would. This is all gibberish to me." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"I understand most of what they're saying, but I don't know how much more there's going to be. There's a whole lot more earth magic than they had at the Wudewas barrier."

"What about the water that you and Paul went through? How does this compare to that?"

"I don't know. I was inside it then. It's hard for me to judge it from the outside."

"Do you want to go and help them?"

"I'll go if they need me, but I think it's better if I stay here for now. I want for you to be able to keep on seeing what's real." Filipe answered quietly.

"You don't trust them, do you?" Agent Roberts asked carefully, interested to understand Filipe's reasoning.

"Why would I? They can mess with our minds, they don't have any problem with kidnapping and they bow down and do anything that Archdruid guy says. The only reason I'm not mad that they're here,

is because I want them where you can keep an eye on them." Filipe said seriously.

Agent Roberts gave Filipe's hand an extra squeeze as he quietly said, "I've noticed how much you seem to admire Paul's intelligence and ingenuity. Please don't ever make the mistake of thinking that he's smarter than you are. What you've just shown me is that you have the type of practical intelligence that will take you far in the world."

"I grew up a lot like Paul, not believing in magic. As far as I knew, there was one set of rules that worked the same for everything and everyone. I guess now, even though I know that I'm a witch, I still look at the world from that old point of view. I don't automatically see magic as the cause or the cure. I see the 'real' world side of things first." Filipe said thoughtfully.

"Filipe, I think that what you and Paul have is a gift, just as important as your magic. Cherish it. The people around you will benefit from your ability to see things from a different point of view and reach different conclusions."

"Being from out of town and 'not white' and a witch, sometimes I can't help but feel like I want to be like everyone else. Even if my mind agrees with what you're saying, deep inside I want to go along with what everyone around me is doing and blend in with them."

"Believe me, I know what it's like to want to belong to a group and be included. But I also know how important it is to be true to yourself and make the decisions that will benefit you in the long run. The fact of the matter is that you *can* do both. Being part of a group can have many benefits, but there's always the possibility that you'll lose yourself and your whole identity will become the label of the group that you've become a part of. You have to have the courage to say 'no' when you know that it's the right thing for you to do."

"Do you think that's what happened to Milo and Jen? They became part of a group and lost themselves?" Filipe asked curiously.

"I don't know. It *does* look that way on the surface."

"Do you think that it's all an act?"

"It could be. We need to be on our guard for however it turns out."

"Do you think that they're going to do something?"

"It doesn't matter if they do or not. We need to be prepared just the same either way."

"Don't worry. Between us, we'll keep everyone safe." Filipe said confidently.

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"I think that's everything." Zanner finally announced.

"Do you want to run back through one more time to be sure that you haven't overlooked anything?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"I've been within the earth element and following along with what Zanner's been doing, at a distance. And I can assure you that he's investigated everything thoroughly."

"Thank you Mr. Hansen. I should have known that you would have been watching over your pupil." Professor Everstone said with a smile, then turned and asked, "Paul? Are you ready to give your evaluation?"

"Yes. But before I start with that I want to be sure that you know that this barrier wasn't set up by the same people who made the Southseid barrier. Not only is it a different *flavor* of magic, but it's used in a different way. They used different spells to get similar results."

"But if the three barriers are connected, it would stand to reason that there would be a person or group of people coordinating the various constructions to ensure that they are compatible."

"When this barrier was first created it had its own local water before it connected to the outside water. I found the remnants of the old water spells."

"G, did you notice if there were any indications of previous air?"

"I think so. I didn't notice it at the time, but that explains some of what I was seeing."

"Let's all of us keep this in mind as Paul tells us about the water element incorporated in the barrier." Professor Everstone said more loudly to ensure that all could hear.

"It would help me a whole lot if I knew what you were looking for, then I'd know what to focus on." Paul said frankly.

"That's *exactly* why I'm not telling you. If I were to narrow the scope of your investigation at this stage of things, you might disregard something significant because it fell outside the boundaries that I had established for you."

"Well, the good news is that there's not too much at this location." Paul said in prelude, then began to give his report of what he had discovered.

Agent Roberts was impressed with Paul's organization. He could almost visualize the bullet points as Paul ticked them off.

Although it took a few minutes for Paul to work his way completely through what he had discovered, his efficiency was such that no one could possibly complain about the time that it took.

In the light of Paul's presentation G's wasn't quite as well organized, but it was a decent effort in its own right.

When G's reasonably succinct evaluation concluded, everyone turned their attention to Professor Everstone, awaiting his reaction.

"Tomorrow we will have to go to the site of the Brynnhollow barrier to perform an evaluation. Although I suspect that I know what we will find there, it is still necessary for us to confirm our suspicions."

"If you like, I can ask Agent Fastbeck to go with us. He knows the people inside and can let them know what's going on."

"Yes. That sounds like a very good idea. Thank you Agent Roberts." Professor Everstone said appreciatively, then looked around the group before saying, "If no one has anything else, we should be on our way."

"Excuse me Professor, but am I to understand that after all that you've done tonight that you aren't going to do anything to reinforce the protectorate?" Archdruid Highley asked cautiously.

"We must first complete our investigation, then decide what steps are to be taken next."

"If it involves the protectorate, I need to be included in your decision making." Archdruid Highley said firmly.

Agent Roberts bristled at the man's demanding tone, but was able to hold his tongue.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. We will evaluate all the information that we've collected then we will make our decisions. At that time we will return and explain what we've come up with. You will have the opportunity to accept or reject our plan at that time. And of course, you'll be free to ask any questions that you might have."

"It would make more sense just to include me from the start." Archdruid Highley pressed.

"No. It wouldn't." Professor Everstone said firmly. "Either you would be in attendance, not understanding a single thing that we were talking about, which would serve no purpose, or you would be asking endless questions, delaying and disrupting our work, which would also serve no purpose."

"I'm responsible for the protectorate. I can't just blindly allow you to do something that might end up endangering it."

"As I said, we will do nothing without your permission and approval." Professor Everstone said firmly, then continued in a more gentle tone, "Perhaps, while we are attending to our work, you might consider using your 'gift' to foresee if one option might potentially yield better results than another for your protectorate. If you were to have such information waiting for us when we return, it would be taken into account."

"Maybe one of us could go with you." Milo said timidly.

"For what possible purpose?" Professor Everstone asked challengingly.

"The only thing that we know for sure is that we *need* the boys, Zanner and Dex, to be here at the protectorate to avert disaster. Would you allow one of us to go with you so that we can be sure that you aren't going to take them away?"

"Do you *really* think that you could stop us?" Paul asked challengingly.

"It won't come to that." Professor Everstone said firmly to Paul, then turned to Milo and explained, "Dex and Zanner will not be leaving before we speak with you again. I give you my word."

Milo's puzzled expression clearly conveyed that he didn't understand how that was supposed to assure him at all.

"If you can't trust me enough to take me at my word, then you shouldn't have given me access to your protectorate. Allow us to help in our own way or ask us to never return. Those are the only choices before you."

Before Milo could respond, Archdruid Highley carefully said, "If I'm understanding you right, you intend to take what you've learned about the barrier of the protectorate and improve it... bring it up to date. Is that right?"

"Yes. That is our intention at this stage of things. Once we've completed our evaluations and had our discussion, it is possible that other priorities may be revealed. Regardless, no action will be taken regarding your protectorate without your knowledge and consent."

Although Agent Roberts was paying attention to what Professor Everstone was saying, he determinedly kept his primary focus on Milo and Jen.

A strange hand gesture by Milo made Agent Roberts clutch Filipe's hand a little more firmly, just to reassure himself that whatever else happened, that he wouldn't find himself lost in an illusion.

"Watch out! He's casting a spell!" Filipe warned.

"Stop that! What are you doing?!" Paul barked at the same time.

"Just making sure that you come back." Milo said unrepentantly.

"Milo, these people are here to *help* us. I'm convinced of that." Archdruid Highley said seriously.

"If that's true, then all I've done is given them another reason to come back." Milo said reasonably.

"What did he just do?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I've never studied anything about fairy magic." Paul said simply.

"Fairy? You know what? That can wait. Right now I need to know what he did and then convince him to undo it." Agent Roberts said as he drew his gun with his free hand.

"If you kill me, you'll never get yourself back. It will be lost forever." Milo said in a slightly quaking voice.

"Kill you? I never said anything about killing you. I said that I would *convince* you. That doesn't involve your death. It involves lots and lots of pain, but no death... well, unless you beg for it long enough and I'm feeling especially compassionate one day."

"Milo. Release your spell. This doesn't help us at all." Archdruid Highley said firmly.

"Jarvis, don't you see? Without this, they have NO reason to come back. If they leave, then your vision will be fulfilled and the protectorate will be destroyed." Milo urged him to understand.

"A moment, if I may." Professor Everstone interrupted.

"Yes, of course Professor." Archdruid Highley immediately responded.

"Pray tell, just what did Mr... Milo do?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Milo has inherited fairy magic. One of the spells that he's adept at using is the removal and relocation of a person's 'other'."

"Removal and relocation roughly translates to mean 'theft'." Agent Roberts couldn't help but remark.

"Agent Roberts..."

"I'm sorry Professor. I was just explaining it for the kids."

"No. that's fine. What I was just wondering is if you would be willing to live with the condition that Milo has inflicted upon you for a short time. Since we were planning on returning anyway, it really won't be an inconvenience for the rest of us. This way these people can have their 'hostage' and we can continue with our work, unabated."

"What did he do to me?"

"In the simplest terms, he has stolen your shadow."

"My shadow?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked around, trying to determine where his shadow *should* be.

With the cloud of fairy lights surrounding them, no one was casting a shadow, so Agent Roberts couldn't confirm what he was being told.

"It shouldn't be much more than a minor annoyance, and you'll get it back when we return, that is, if you agree."

"I think that if I just blow his kneecaps off, I can get him to give it back right now." Agent Roberts said frankly.

Professor Everstone seemed to consider for a moment, then said, "This is between you and Milo. If you feel that inflicting damage on him is the best solution, I won't stand in your way. Just please keep in mind that the children are watching. Be aware of the example that you're setting for them."

Agent Roberts looked Milo in the eyes and could see the terror housed within.

"You only did this to me, right? You didn't hurt any of the kids?" Agent Roberts asked to confirm.

"Yes. I didn't want to take the chance of incapacitating someone who was necessary to your project." Milo cautiously explained.

"And when we come back, you'll undo what you did to me?" Agent Roberts asked seriously.

"Yes. I will. I promise."

"I don't trust your promises any more than you trust ours. But what I *do* trust is the knowledge that if you're not here when I come back, that I will use the full resources of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to hunt you down, and when I find you, I will make what remains of your life very *very* uncomfortable."

"I'll be here. I'm sure that Jarvis won't let me leave, after what I've just done." Milo said regretfully.

"Fine. Whatever." Agent Roberts snapped irritably, then turned to Professor Everstone and asked, "Are we done here?"

"Yes. I believe so." Professor Everstone said gravely.

"Then I'm going back to the car. Anyone who wants to can come with me." Agent Roberts said as he started to walk away.

Before he had taken two steps, he felt a smaller hand work its way into his.

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from that. I don't know anything about fairy magic." Filipe said quietly as they walked.

"You did fine, Filipe. It's thanks to you that I was able to see what was real." Agent Roberts assured him.

"I'm glad you didn't kill him. Even though it doesn't bother me too much when I see something like that on TV, I don't think I want to see it for real." Filipe said honestly.

"What Milo did was dishonorable, but he doesn't need to die for it. He doesn't trust others, but believes that others should trust him. In a way, what he did was level the playing field, at least in his own mind. Now, to him, it looks like we both have something the other wants, so we have a reason to work together."

"But we would have helped them anyway." Filipe said in confusion.

"You and I know that, but it seems that Milo doesn't believe in people who would help others without asking for something in return."

"Would you really have shot him?" Filipe asked quietly.

"Maybe." Agent Roberts reluctantly admitted, then clarified, "He attacked me, so it's only natural for me to want to respond in kind. I can't say that I'm proud of it, but for just a few seconds, shooting him felt like the right thing to do."

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Conversation stopped as they climbed the steep path out of the basin.

As they climbed, Agent Roberts noticed that the others of their group were silently following along.

Once they reached the top, Filipe did a simple gesture and the path before them lit up.

"That's really handy. You'll have to teach me how to do it one of these days." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"I would if I could." Filipe assured him.

As they walked toward the parsonage, Agent Roberts went on alert as he heard someone approaching them from behind.

"Agent Roberts? I'm sorry." Milo said as he caught up to them.

"If you were *really* sorry you'd undo whatever you did to me." Agent Roberts said simply.

"You've got to understand, Jarvis saw the destruction of the protectorate. That's our purpose for being here. It's what we live for." Milo urged him to understand.

"Maybe you should have more than one thing to live for." Filipe interjected.

At Milo's uncomprehending expression, Filipe explained, "If you have lots of things in your life to live for, then it doesn't kill you when you lose one of them."

"He's right. You need to get a life, Milo. What you're doing here isn't healthy." Agent Roberts confirmed.

"Jarvis needs us to help him guard the protectorate." Milo urged them to understand.

"That's fine. I'm not saying that you should stop. I'm just saying that a person needs more than one thing in their life to care about. You need friends, family... a pet, maybe. I don't know. But focusing all your attention and devotion on just one goal makes you a little bit crazy, and when that goal is threatened, it can push you over the edge."

As they approached the parsonage, Milo once again quietly said, "I'm sorry."

"I can see that you are." Agent Roberts said resignedly, then guided Filipe to walk with him around the parsonage and on toward the church.

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Agent Roberts was aware of the others following behind them, but didn't feel like engaging them in conversation. Instead, he kept up a reasonable pace around the church and back toward the cars that they had arrived in.

"I think that we could use the ride back to Waxell as an opportunity to process some of what we have discovered thus far. If no one has an objection, I would like for G and Corabeth to ride with Miss Oaken so that they can discuss what they have been able to uncover about the air element. Likewise, Zanner and Dex can travel with Mr. Hansen to discuss the properties of the earth spells used. Filipe and Paul can ride with me so that we may discuss what has been discovered about water."

"Speaking of water, if you're done with The Third Grail, I would like to put it away for safekeeping." Mr. Bentley Brown said in a less demanding tone than was usual for him.

"Sure." Paul easily agreed.

At the same time, G automatically walked to Professor Everstone and handed him the spear.

"I didn't really do anything with the water this time. I can ride with Agent Roberts." Filipe said quietly.

"Perhaps you didn't participate in this assessment, but there are certain things you will need to know when we proceed to the next stage of our work." Professor Everstone told him seriously.

"Yeah and besides, you know about the thaumaturgy and a lot of other stuff that I don't have a talent for. I gathered a lot of information, but I'm going to need your help to be able to do anything with it." Paul explained.

Agent Roberts smiled, knowing just how important it was for Filipe to hear that he was *needed* for something.

"Where and when should I meet up with you in the morning?" Mr. Bentley Brown reluctantly asked.

Agent Roberts glanced at Professor Everstone to see if he wanted to answer and received a nod in response.

"I think our best bet is to meet at the Waxell Diner for breakfast at nine." Agent Roberts said seriously, then continued, "But you're welcome to come with us now. I have a spare room that's not being used."

"Given the dynamic nature of the project thus far, perhaps it *would* be best if I were to accompany you."

"Good. Just follow along and we'll be at my house in no time." Agent Roberts said simply.

That being settled, everyone went to their cars and began the long trek through the rolling hills and back toward Waxell.

Chapter 25

Agent Roberts found himself alone as he led the procession of vehicles down the nearly nonexistent dirt road.

Although he could have driven a bit faster, Agent Roberts was mindful of those following him and was careful not to get too far ahead of them. When he checked his rearview mirror, something odd caught his attention or, rather, the absence of something.

Fighting down his natural inclination to investigate, Agent Roberts waved a hand in front of the rearview mirror only once to confirm his suspicion.

He had no reflection.

Agent Roberts felt a rush of panic at the realization, although his logical mind struggled with the reasoning behind it.

The loss of his shadow and reflection didn't appear to have any 'real world' consequences. But for some undefinable reason, Agent Roberts felt diminished by it.

As he approached a sharp turn, he slowed his pace and devoted his full attention to the task at hand. Whether he could cast a shadow or not, the entire group was still depending on him.

Agent Roberts was very aware that the dirt road that they were travelling on had become more of a 'mud' road.

While he didn't feel that he was in danger of bogging down in the mud, he couldn't be sure that the last vehicles in their procession would be as lucky. It was entirely possible that each vehicle might dig the ruts just a little deeper so that the last member of the group might end up being 'high centered'.

Even so, he had no choice but to carry on.

When Agent Roberts pulled through the wrought iron gate he felt some small measure of relief at being outside the 'official' domain of Nevermore.

His spirits lifted further when he and his companions were once again on paved roads.

The drive back to Waxell was long and uneventful.

Even though Agent Roberts wasn't necessarily *familiar* with the roads, he had looked at the local map enough to feel confident that he could lead the group back to his home.

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Upon arriving at his driveway, Agent Roberts was surprised to find a full fledged stream flowing.

When Mrs. Spencer had warned him that the driveway had a tendency to flood, he had pictured a large standing puddle, not white-water rapids.

Agent Roberts pulled his car to a stop and considered what options were available to him.

He *could* lead everyone to the Spencer's place, then lead a cross-country hike from there.

A knock on his window startled him.

He looked out the window and found Paul and Filipe walking to the front of his car.

As he watched, both boys started making the gestures that Agent Roberts had come to associate with spellcasting.

When they had finished, Paul turned and motioned for Agent Roberts to pull forward.

Although Agent Roberts was legitimately impressed, he was still able to keep his wits about him enough to start driving forward, between Paul and Filipe.

They had somehow been able to stop the flow of water enough to allow him access to his driveway.

He pulled forward and kept close watch in his rearview mirror to be sure that the entire procession were able to make it across.

Once the last of the cars had crossed, Paul and Filipe hurried back to Professor Everstone's car and got in.

As soon as they were safely ensconced in the professor's car, Agent Roberts continued his drive up the slight incline of his driveway, toward his house.

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As Agent Roberts opened the door, he had to admit that it felt incredibly good to be 'home'.

The day had been unexpectedly long and he wanted nothing more than to relax for a while.

"Before anyone has a chance to wander away, I want to be sure that everyone knows our plans for tomorrow." Professor Everstone said loudly enough to gain everyone's attention.

"First, I'd like to say that you've all done very well today. You performed beyond my expectations."

Agent Roberts couldn't help but agree. Considering that they were working with a group of young teenagers, he would have expected them to have acted out at least a little bit.

"Although I would like to be able to give you adequate time to rest and relax after the long day that we've had, I'm afraid that there is simply too much left to do. Let's meet back here in the living room at eight thirty in the morning, so that we can go and have breakfast before we leave to assess the state of the Brynn barrier."

Agent Roberts looked around to verify that Professor Everstone's message had been received.

"Sophia, Dag and Shawn, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to have a word with you before we retire for the evening. Everyone else, enjoy your rest. Hopefully tomorrow won't turn out to be quite as long."

Realizing that they had been dismissed, the teenagers slowly began to make their way toward the door that led to the upstairs.

"Mr. Bentley Brown, let me show you where your room is." Agent Roberts said, before Professor Everstone could start in on whatever he was going to say.

"Thank you. I appreciate that." Mr. Bentley Brown said quietly, then followed as Agent Roberts conducted him down the hallway.

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Entering the living room, Agent Roberts noticed that everyone had taken seats, but appeared to be awaiting his return before beginning their discussion.

"I just want to verify what we've discovered today and discuss your insights before we proceed."

"From what I saw at the protectorate today, I believe that any but the most basic 'reconstruction' will require my participation. Although Zanner is reasonably skilled, I believe that the sheer scope of the project may be beyond his capabilities." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"I have similar concerns about Paul and Filipe. While it is possible that they may be able to rise to the occasion and perform the maintenance tasks without my intervention, I believe that it would be too big a risk to take. Even with three of us, the outcome is by no means assured." Professor Everstone responded.

"What about Dex? What's the danger that he'll get consumed by the power of the earth?" Agent Roberts asked seriously.

"Dexter has performed beyond my expectations. Rather than just being a conduit for the magic of the earth element, he has taken on

the role of aiding Zanner in his efforts. That's a level of control that I did not initially expect him to achieve."

"So he's out of danger?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Not entirely, but the danger to him is less than I was originally anticipating. With the level of control that he has achieved, he can now do something to protect himself if things take an unexpected turn."

"I agree. I could feel Dex's influence when Zanner was examining the earth element of the protectorate. Not only will he be able to protect himself, but he can also help Zanner by regulating the flow of the earth magic as he needs it." Mr. Hansen interjected.

"If all goes as I expect, Miss Oaken, Corabeth and G will be primarily involved in the assessment of the Brynn barrier. Can you think of anything we might be able to do in preparation?"

"I need to call Agent Fastbeck. He knows the people inside the barrier and will want to be there with us." Agent Roberts volunteered.

"Yes. Good idea." Professor Everstone agreed.

"Once we've completed the assessment of the Brynnhollow barrier, we're going to have to come up with a plan for what to do next. Do you already have something in mind for that?" Miss Oaken asked curiously.

"My original plan had been to gather the children and encourage them to evaluate the barrier's strengths and weaknesses, then develop ways to improve upon what already exists. Although the scope of the project has expanded to a rather uncomfortable degree, I see no reason that we should exclude them from that very necessary stage of the process."

"From what I've seen of Paul and Filipe, they'll thrive on the chance to brainstorm and problem-solve." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"I believe that Zanner and Dex will both benefit from being included in the planning, not only to assure their understanding, but also to relay to them that they are members of the team, not just tools being used to accomplish a goal." Mr. Hansen added.

"I know that Corabeth has been feeling a little left out, like her primary ability isn't of any use." Miss Oaken said quietly.

"Although we will have need of Miss Knawld's signature ability, we're also going to need for her to set aside her self-defeating attitude and at least *attempt* to work on the air manipulation with G. He has been able to successfully wield The Mikael Spear but he won't be able to reconstruct the air element of a barrier entirely on his own."

"I think that once we're done here, I'll have a little talk with her about that. I get the feeling that she doesn't really believe what she's saying. She just needs for someone to reassure her and tell her that she can do it." Miss Oaken said frankly.

"If you think that she will be up to it, I'll leave it to you." Professor Everstone said simply to Miss Oaken, then to the rest of the group he continued, "If no one has anything else, I believe that now would be a good time to retire for the evening."

Everyone seemed to be in agreement as they stood.

"Mr. Hansen, could I talk to you for a minute?" Agent Roberts quickly asked.

"You can call me Dag if you like." Mr. Hansen responded, then asked, "What can I do for you?"

"It's about my shadow. I was just wondering if there's anything that I need to know or if there's any danger that I should be aware of?"

"No. Not that I can think of. If I were you, I'd avoid going out in public in bright sunlight. Casting no shadow can make you look 'unreal', like you've been badly photoshopped or are standing in front of a low budget green screen effect."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"If you're concerned, you might want to ask Miss Oaken about it. Shadowmancy is a wizardry specialty based in the air element. I'm sure that she will be far more knowledgeable on the subject than I am."

"I was wondering. I just didn't know if losing my shadow might have some other consequences."

"Automatic doors and motion detectors probably won't be able to see you, but I don't see that being much of a problem around here. I can't really think of anything else."

"Agent Roberts? Do you have a battery?" Filipe asked as he approached with Paul, G and Corabeth following closely behind.

"What kind?" Agent Roberts asked.

"It doesn't matter. We just need it for a spell."

Agent Roberts walked toward the kitchen and stopped at his computer desk. He opened the drawer and took out a package.

"How's this?" Agent Roberts asked as he held up a nine volt battery.

"That's perfect." Paul said happily, then quickly added, "We're ready to do it, if you want to see."

"Okay." Agent Roberts said uncertainly as he followed the teenagers to the kitchen island.

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts watched, a strange glowing diagram appeared on the countertop. It was a golden circle surrounding the outline of a red triangle.

"Put the battery right there." Paul said as he pointed.

Agent Roberts did so, then stood back to see what was going to happen next.

"Corabeth, yours goes there." Filipe said as he pointed to another section of the diagram.

As Agent Roberts watched, Corabeth placed a necklace where Filipe had indicated.

The necklace had a small pendant that looked like a perfectly clear marble, clutched in a bird's talon made of gold.

As soon as the necklace was in place, glowing writing began to appear within the diagram.

Three small balls of fire sprang into being, one at each point of the triangle.

"I don't have any talent for thaumaturgy, so Filipe is going to have to do this part." Paul explained.

Agent Roberts didn't know what that meant, but had no problem accepting that Paul and Filipe did.

"Filipe, you ready?" Paul asked as he looked over the diagram.

"Ready when you are." Filipe said confidently.

Agent Roberts watched as Filipe began to speak his spell while simultaneously performing the gestures associated with spellcasting.

The whole production took less than a minute.

After a long silent moment, Filipe cautiously asked, "Do you want to test it?"

"No. I'm sure that it worked."

The three fireballs disappeared first, then the spell diagram faded from sight.

Paul scooted the nine volt battery out of the way, then a new diagram appeared, this one being a pentagram, with the necklace located in the middle.

"I'll enchant it and you bind the magic to it to fuel it. Does that work for you?" Paul asked to confirm.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Filipe immediately answered.

Once again glowing text began to appear within the diagram.

Five small balls of fire ignited, one hovering above each of the points of the pentagram.

Paul started his spellcasting and Filipe joined him a moment later.

As Agent Roberts watched... nothing really happened.

At one point Paul reached out and touched each of the five points of the pentagram, but for the most part he and Filipe just spoke their spells.

While the spectacle of the diagram and fireballs was somewhat impressive, the wonder of it didn't last very long.

Filipe and Paul were doing their spellcasting while the rest stood around and watched.

* * * * *

"That should do it." Paul finally said as the spell diagram faded from sight.

"Put it on so we can test it out." Filipe said excitedly.

Agent Roberts looked around the group to see what was going to happen next.

"Agent Roberts! Put it on!" Filipe insisted.

"Me? Why?"

"We made this charm for you. Put it on so that we can see if it works." Filipe said somewhat impatiently.

"What does it do?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked as he picked up the necklace.

"It's the same spell that I've been using on you all day to keep you from being tricked by Jen's mind control illusions. Now you won't have to worry about it if I'm not around."

Agent Roberts brought the necklace over his head, then waited to see if he noticed anything out of the ordinary.

"G, do you want to do something to test it out?"

"Sure." G said easily, then out of nowhere two duplicate copies of G appeared one on either side of him.

Before Agent Roberts could react, the duplicates began to fade and waver.

"What do you see?" Filipe asked hopefully.

"I see two copies of G, but they're insubstantial, almost like they're ghosts."

"Take off the necklace and you'll be able to see them like the rest of us do."

Agent Roberts took off the necklace and all of a sudden the clones of G appeared to be perfectly solid. In fact, he'd be hard pressed to pick which one of the three was real.

"We thought about making you a magic ward too, but that might mess with you getting your shadow back." Filipe quickly explained.

"Yeah, and besides that, we can't be sure that it would work. Not every spell can be used on a charm." Paul added helpfully.

Agent Roberts put the necklace back on and watched as the copies of G once again became insubstantial.

"Thank you, all of you, for doing this for me." Agent Roberts said sincerely.

"Thanks for working so hard to keep us safe." Filipe countered.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but smile as he said, "It's been my pleasure."

* * * * *

"Conrad?"

"*Shawn? Is everything alright? I was beginning to get worried.*"

"Everyone's fine. The job just seems to have grown beyond anyone's expectations."

"*Is it anything that I can help with?*"

"Actually, yes. I was hoping that you might be able to accompany us to... Rocky's. We'll be at the Waxell Diner at nine in the morning to have breakfast and we'll leave from there."

"*Are you sure that you don't need for me to stop by tonight?*"

"No. Everything's settled for the moment. I can fill you in on the details in person."

"*Okay. I'll see you then. Have a good evening.*"

"Thanks. Goodnight Conrad."

"*Goodnight.*"

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts woke to the sound of his alarm, he felt quite a bit better than he had expected.

After the long hours and amount of hiking that they had done the previous day, he expected to be sore and tired.

It wasn't until he went into the bathroom that he was reminded that it wasn't just a normal day. He did his best to stick to his morning routine, but the entire process turned out to be bizarre and somewhat frustrating.

In preparation for the coming day, he dressed in clothes suitable for hiking rather than the suits that he typically wore.

When he finally emerged from his room, he found Miss Oaken, Professor Everstone and Mr. Bentley Brown sitting in the living room.

"Good morning. How is everyone doing today?" Agent Roberts asked as he took a seat on the couch.

"Although a bit more sleep might have been nice, I believe that we are sufficiently prepared for the coming day." Professor Everstone said calmly.

"Has anyone gone to wake up the kids yet?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Mr. Hansen is seeing to that now."

"Miss Oaken, Mr. Hansen told me that you might know something about the whole thing with my missing shadow. Is there anything that I need to be worried about?"

"In the short term, no. Probably not. In the longer term, there might be consequences."

"Like what?"

"You have to realize that your shadow, your *other*, acts as a reservoir for the things you struggle to repress. Without it, you don't have the same capacity for denying or ignoring things that you're used to. They will weigh on you and eat at you until you deal with them... or until they destroy you."

"For example?"

"I don't know you well enough to speculate. For some it's a tendency toward aggression, for others it might be the craving of an addiction. It has been said that it's the loss of their reflections that makes vampires into amoral monsters."

"The vampires that I've met aren't monsters, although I have to admit that I didn't notice if they had reflections or not."

There was a long moment of silence as the others took in what he had just revealed.

"The kids will be down in a minute. They sure are grumpy when they don't get enough sleep." Mr. Hansen said as he walked into the living room.

"I'm sure that their moods will improve once they've been fed." Professor Everstone said encouragingly.

"I hope so." Mr. Hansen said as he took a seat on the couch.

"In regard to your shadow..." Miss Oaken said quietly. "...for the amount of time that you will be without it, I doubt that you'll even notice that it's missing."

"That's good to know. But I'm pretty sure that I *will* notice, especially in the mornings when it's time for me to shave."

* * * * *

As soon as the last of the teenagers had straggled in, Agent Roberts led the way out to the cars. The steady rain wasn't a surprise.

Since his car had been the first in, he followed the group down the long drive to the stream that had formed the day before.

As he approached, he saw Paul and Filipe standing in the rain, using their magic to hold the stream back.

Filipe made a quick motion as Agent Roberts passed, indicating for him to stop.

As soon as Agent Roberts had gotten fully onto the road, both Paul and Filipe ran to his car and climbed in.

"How are you guys doing today?" Agent Roberts asked as he started following the other cars toward town.

"Paul and G have been telling me about Brynnhollow. I hope we get to go inside." Filipe said honestly.

"You got to go into both of the last two. Give somebody else a turn." Paul said playfully.

"When it comes to Brynnhollow, listen to Agent Fastbeck. He knows the people and the situation that they're in. He also knows us and the situation that we're in. If he says 'no', he has a good reason. Trust him."

"Do you expect him to say no?" Filipe asked curiously.

"I don't expect anything. I prepare." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Even if we don't get to visit with them today, we'll probably still have to come back to work on their barrier." Filipe said reasonably.

"Except that it will probably be G and Corabeth working on their barrier. *We'll* probably be working on the Wudewas barrier." Paul said frankly.

"It's better if we stay in the habit of calling it 'Southseid'.

"What do you want us to call 'The Protectorate'?" Paul asked curiously.

"'Nevermore', I think. Unless there's a need to differentiate the barrier from the surrounding area, it should be close enough."

"Is it okay if we call Brynnhollow... Brynnhollow?" Filipe asked uncertainly.

"Since I haven't been there before, I don't know of anything else to call it."

"Well, I *have* been there and I don't know either, except to call it the place where Cain and Deimos live." Paul said frankly.

"Even if we're not able to go in and visit with them, it's possible that they might be able to come out and visit with you for a while."

"Yeah. That'd be great. Maybe Jim and Tannis could come out too. I'd really like to see how they're doing."

"Like I said, Trust Agent Fastbeck." Agent Roberts said as he focused most of his attention on his driving.

"Oh! I forgot to ask. How's your thing going with your shadow? Does it hurt or anything?" Filipe asked curiously.

"No. I don't really notice it except when I look in a mirror and there's no one looking back at me."

"There's not? When he said that he stole your shadow, I didn't think about him stealing your reflection too." Paul said with concern.

"I didn't realize that either, until I looked in the rearview mirror on the way home last night." Agent Roberts said honestly, then added, "Mr. Hansen and Miss Oaken don't think it's going to be a problem."

"Maybe not for you..." Paul said hesitantly.

"What do you mean?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Your shadow belongs with you. Being connected to you is its natural state. When it's forcibly separated from you, it tends *not* to be too happy about it." Paul said carefully.

"It's not *happy*? Are you saying that my shadow can think and feel for itself?" Agent Roberts asked dubiously.

"Not always. But it *is* possible. The thing is, if that happened, Milo might have bitten off more than he can chew. Shadows play by a different set of rules. Physics don't really apply to them, or at least not normal three dimensional physics."

"Why didn't you tell me about this last night?"

"Because I didn't know about it then. I sometimes know certain things, like spells and stuff like that, when I need to know them."

"And you need to know *this*, right now?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I don't know. It happens when it happens. As far as I know, the timing doesn't mean anything."

"But you're sure it's true? I mean, this information that you get, is it always right?"

"So far, yeah. But you know that thing about Archdruid Highley having second sight? I kinda have some of that too. So, I guess it's possible that if I can see what's going to happen, that maybe I can do stuff to make it not happen. Whatever it is, I don't really have any control over it. Spells and stuff just pop into my head sometimes and usually it turns out to be good if I pay attention to it."

"He doesn't always know that he's doing it, either." Filipe interjected.

"How's that?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Sometimes we'll be talking and he'll say something, like it's something that I already know about and it turns out to be something that hasn't happened yet." Filipe explained.

"Yeah. G's noticed that too." Paul agreed.

"So, do you have any warnings for me right now?"

"I just get the feeling that your shadow thing isn't really that big of a deal for you, but by the time we get back to Milo, he might be really glad to be rid of it." Paul said thoughtfully.

Agent Roberts slowly nodded as he pulled into the next available parking space in front of the Waxell Diner.

* * * * *

"Good morning Agent Roberts. Would you like the country breakfast this morning?" Harry asked cheerfully.

"You must be some kind of a mind reader, Harry. Yes. That sounds great." Agent Roberts chuckled.

"Did you bring your cup?" Harry asked as he stopped to see for himself.

"Not this morning. We're going to be out in the field today."

"Have a seat and I'll bring your coffee then." Harry said before dashing away.

"Shawn. Over here." Agent Fastbeck called from one of the booths.

"Have you been waiting long?" Agent Roberts asked as he approached.

"Not at all. I've barely had a chance to sip my coffee." Agent Fastbeck said and raised his cup to display his evidence.

Agent Roberts glanced at the boys still accompanying him, then thought to ask, "Do we have any official business to discuss?"

"I think I may have discovered Mr. Ingram's true identity but I'm pretty sure that you're already aware of everything else that I know." Agent Fastbeck said frankly, then thought to ask, "Do *you* have anything that we need to discuss privately?"

Agent Roberts thought for a moment, then cautiously said, "I think the boys are aware of everything that I'm going to tell you, and it's possible that they might be knowledgeable in some subjects that I'm not, so having them here for this discussion might be the most productive way to proceed."

"Okay. Scoot on in here and let's get started."

* * * * *

Before Paul, Filipe and Agent Roberts could get themselves settled, Harry was back, placing a cup of coffee in front of Agent Roberts and menus in front of the boys.

"Would you boys like some milk or juice?" Harry pleasantly asked.

"Can I have some coffee?" Paul asked Agent Roberts hopefully.

"Sure. If you want." Agent Roberts said easily.

"I'll have milk." Filipe added.

"Be right back." Harry said before dashing away.

"Before you begin, I think I've been able to uncover Mr. Ingram's true identity. There's a very good chance that his real name is Miklos Szabla. His mother was a member of a cult in the area called 'The Shamanic Ovates'. According to the FBI records on the group, they have some bizarre belief structure based on classic Druidism and Native American Shamanism. The bureau keeps loose tabs on them, but by all accounts they seem to be mostly harmless."

"That sounds about right. Mr. Ingram goes by the name Milo and the leader is called Archdruid Highley." Agent Roberts confirmed.

"Jarvis Highley, he's the de facto leader since the disappearance of his father, Ambros Highley." Agent Fastbeck said slowly.

"Yes. That's him. He mentioned his father, but never said what happened to him."

"Okay. So it appears that we're talking about the same person. What else have you been able to uncover?"

"Archdruid Highley, Milo and their companion Jengelica appear to be the keepers of a barrier that they call 'The Protectorate'."

"They call the place 'Nevermore' to make it sound creepy." Paul interjected.

"That's right." Agent Roberts confirmed, then looked up and smiled at Harry as he approached.

Harry quickly and efficiently placed the coffee and milk on the table in front of Paul and Filipe respectively.

"Does everyone know what they'd like to eat?" Harry asked as he took out a pad of paper.

"What are you having, Agent Fastbeck?" Paul asked curiously.

"Biscuits and gravy."

"That sounds good. I'll have that too." Paul said decisively.

All attention turned to Filipe as he examined the menu before him.

Finally, Filipe looked up and said, "I'd really like some pancakes."

"I'll have that right out for you." Harry said as he started collecting menus.

"Thanks." Filipe said gratefully.

Harry gave him a quick smile, then hurried away.

Once Harry was out of earshot, Agent Fastbeck quietly asked, "So you've discovered another barrier, what does this have to do with us visiting 'Rocky' this morning?"

"When we were at 'Southseid', Paul noticed that there was an external connection to the barrier. At the time we didn't understand what that was about, but when we encountered Milo, we began to suspect that 'Nevermore' and 'Southseid' were connected..."

"...and you suspect that 'Rocky's' place is as well." Agent Fastbeck supplied, nodding as he did so.

"Yes. That's what we'd like to try to confirm this morning." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"We can't really do what we came here for until we've checked out all three, because if we tried, we might cause all three of them to collapse." Paul said seriously.

"That seems odd. I would think, given what they are, that they would be more durable than that." Agent Fastbeck said honestly.

"Well, that's just one possible outcome. Another might be that if one barrier failed, the other two might end up being without clean water, breathable air or fertile earth." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"But if that were the case, then the failure of one would automatically cause the failure of all three. I can't see that being a very efficient system to have in place." Agent Fastbeck countered.

"When the... Southseid people... were in trouble, they went to Rocky's for help. Right? If they're not really friends or anything, why would they do that?" Paul asked curiously.

"I was told that there was an ancient pact made that if one of the colonies was in trouble, the other would come to their aid." Agent Fastbeck said slowly.

"But if all the colonies depend on each other, then helping each other would make more sense. I mean, it's not only the right thing to do, but by helping each other you help yourself." Filipe said thoughtfully.

"Maybe. But if what you're saying is true, it seems that the people of the current generation aren't aware of it." Agent Fastbeck said speculatively.

"I'd have to go back and look again to be sure, but I think that the barriers have redundant systems in place so that if they lose their outside connection, the local backup system will take over." Paul said slowly.

"As a strategy, *that* would make more sense." Agent Fastbeck said firmly.

"But there must be some benefit to having the primary system distributed the way it is. Otherwise, why would they go to all the trouble?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"From what I saw, that's not normal water. Not only was it created differently from regular water, but it also has the ability to carry a 'charge'."

"So, it's like 'holy' water?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"Holy water is a completely different thing, but I think you've got the right idea. I can't talk about the air and the earth, but the water

isn't regular water. If the people in the colonies had to start drinking *regular* water, I think they'd be a lot less healthy and happy than they are." Paul carefully explained.

"So interconnecting the colonies might have been a plan to help them endure for centuries without outside intervention." Agent Fastbeck said speculatively.

"They were set up so that someone could work on them. They meant for the barriers to be updated." Paul said with certainty.

"But it appears that Southseid and Nevermore were forgotten over time."

"If that's true, why didn't whoever updated the Brynn... Rocky's barrier notice the interconnection?" Filipe asked curiously.

"That's a good question." Agent Roberts admitted.

"At Southseid, all of us were in there and *we* almost didn't notice it. If they weren't looking for it, maybe they just missed it." Paul guessed.

"But wouldn't they notice something weird with there being so much 'air' and so little everything else?" Filipe asked curiously.

"The two barriers that we've already examined are so different from each other that I could understand it if someone didn't notice something out of place." Paul responded.

"Would it have been possible for them to have reinforced the barrier without disturbing the others?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think so. Try thinking of it like the layers of an onion. The outer layer is the actual barrier. You don't have to dig too deep to change something about it. But the mega air and water, *that's* almost at the core, if they'd screwed around with that, they might have caused the whole thing, all three of them, to come crashing down."

"Sorry that took so long, we're kind of busy right now." Harry said as he carried a heavily laden tray to the table.

"It's fine, Harry. It hasn't been long at all." Agent Fastbeck assured him.

"Does anyone need a refill while I'm here?" Harry asked as he placed their orders on the table.

"I think we're good." Agent Fastbeck said as he looked around the table, then added, "But you might want to bring the coffee pot with you next time you're in the neighborhood."

"I'll do that." Harry said with a grin, then quickly added, "Just let me know if you need anything."

As the four watched Harry rush away, Agent Roberts quietly said, "The three barriers form a triangle and Waxell's at the center of it."

Agent Fastbeck contemplated that for a moment, then finally said, "Then we'd better be sure to do this right."

Chapter 26

Filipe was the youngest of the teenagers and beyond that, he was a bit small for his age. Even so, he was still able to put away an impressive amount of food.

Agent Roberts supposed that with the amount of hiking and other exertion that they had done the previous day that all of them were due for some additional caloric intake.

After everyone had finished their breakfasts, Professor Everstone paid their bill and left a generous tip for Harry.

The professor had suggested that everyone travel in their groups to prepare themselves for the task ahead. So Agent Roberts found himself alone in the car, following Agent Fastbeck toward their next destination.

The quiet time alone in his own company gave him a chance to think. He didn't feel any ill effects from being without his shadow, but since he was dealing with something that could conceivably affect his perception, he couldn't be sure that he *would* notice a change if there were one.

According to what Mr. Hansen and Miss Oaken had told him, his shadow was a reservoir for those things which he kept repressed. While Miss Oaken had suggested that his aggression might be an issue, he didn't feel that he had been repressing any anger or hostility. He had always been very good about expressing his anger in an appropriate manner when he was feeling it and in the longer term, finding healthy ways of dealing with it.

Likewise, or perhaps as a result, when he had faced his issues with his parents, he hadn't repressed his emotions. He had succinctly explained what he expected and in some instances, what he would tolerate. Although they had tried to use passive aggressive tactics to manipulate him into doing what they wanted, in the end he had

stood up for himself and remained true to his own convictions. Looking back, he had no regrets.

As far as Michelle, he had told his sister honestly about his concerns for her and offered her a reprieve from their parents' constant hounding. He had, in essence, paved the way. He knew within himself that he hadn't repressed anything in his interactions with her or in matters regarding her. He told her that he loved her and outlined his concerns. What happened next would have to be up to her or it wouldn't have any meaning.

Feeling settled in his soul, Agent Roberts concluded that the absence of his shadow would probably just be a minor inconvenience for a short time.

As he relaxed, his mind began to wander and he felt unusually tranquil as he remembered a soft, sweet smile. Although the smile was indeed beautiful, what made it most precious was that it was for him.

Realizing what he was doing, Agent Roberts regretfully put the image out of his mind so that he could focus on the job ahead.

As he considered the likelihood that in the coming day's events, G and Corabeth would be called upon to go above and beyond the job that they had been invited to do, that smile once again intruded on his thoughts, stirring feelings within him that he hadn't experienced for a very long time.

"Oh shit!" Agent Roberts gasped as he realized what was happening to him and very nearly caused him to apply the brake. The revelation was so stark that he felt the instinctive need to 'literally' stop and deal with it.

Even though he was shocked, he was still 'with it' enough to not fully panic. Years of training in keeping his cool in crisis situations kicked in and he began to evaluate the elements of what he was experiencing.

While his aggression and anger seemed to have been appropriately channeled or otherwise dealt with, his sexuality had always been shoved aside to deal with later. And, if he were being honest, he had to admit that 'later' rarely, if ever, came.

If what Mr. Hansen and Miss Oaken had told him was accurate, and it was looking more and more like it might be. Then that might mean that his shadow could contain a lifetime worth of his repressed sexuality.

Not knowing the nature or capabilities of a shadow or reflection, he couldn't begin to speculate about the 'real world' consequences of such a thing. Although from what Paul had said the previous night, the 'untethered' shadow had the capability of taking some sort of action in the real world.

Every so often the universe decides to dispense a little justice. Although he knew that he shouldn't delight in another person's misfortune, Agent Roberts found that in this instance he couldn't help himself.

As he fought down a grin, Agent Roberts muttered to himself, "Poor Milo."

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts continued to drive, the vision of that smile, those kissable lips, kept returning to haunt him.

Since he seemed incapable of ignoring it, he instead devoted a sliver of his attention to it.

As Agent Fastbeck began to slow, Agent Roberts turned his full attention forward. What he was seeing didn't make sense at first. As he got closer, he realized that the hazy shimmering before him was an immense illusion.

Agent Fastbeck drove headlong into it and seeing that no injury had befallen him, Agent Roberts followed closely behind. If he had a little more time he would have very much liked to have stopped

and taken off his necklace so that he could see what everyone else was seeing.

As Agent Roberts pulled his car to a stop in the field that was serving as a parking lot, he noticed the odd variety of other vehicles parked there.

Unbidden, stories of the planes and ships lost in the bermuda triangle flashed into his mind.

* * * * *

As Agent Fastbeck approached, Agent Roberts pulled his mind back to the present and got out of his car and opened his umbrella.

"I'm sure that these guys will want to get right to work on the barrier. If you'll watch out for them, I'll fly into town and make sure that they know what we're going to be doing." Agent Fastbeck said professionally.

"It'll take them a few minutes to get acclimated to the relics, but they should be ready to get started before too long." Agent Roberts responded, then thought to add, "Paul and G made a point of asking if they could visit with their friends, if that's possible."

"No promises, but I'll do my best to pass on the message..." Agent Fastbeck trailed off as he looked strangely at Agent Roberts.

Before Agent Roberts could ask, Agent Fastbeck cautiously asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"Why?"

"Something seems... off, about you. I can't quite put my finger on it." Agent Fastbeck said slowly.

"Oh, yeah. Don't worry about it. It's nothing. Milo just stole my shadow yesterday. As soon as we go back to Nevermore he's going to give it back to me."

"He *stole* your shadow?" Agent Fastbeck said dubiously.

Agent Roberts looked at the ground at Agent Fastbeck's feet to see where his shadow was, then down at where his own should have been.

"See? No shadow." Agent Roberts said as he pointed, then added, "I don't have a reflection either."

"Are you alright?" Agent Fastbeck asked with concern.

"Yeah. I'm fine. From what I can tell, a shadow is something like an appendix, serving to remove emotional toxins from the system and to store beneficial emotional energies for when they're needed later. Being without it for a while shouldn't cause too much of a problem."

"Do the others know?"

"Yeah. They don't seem too worried about it."

"You need to understand that when he attacked you, he escalated this situation. I'm involved now. If you need *anything*, let me know."

Beautiful kissable lips, timidly smiling, intruded into Agent Roberts' thoughts for a moment.

"Yeah. I'm fine right now, but as soon as I'm not, I'll tell you."

"They look like they're ready to get started. I'm going now, but I'll be back before you know it." Agent Fastbeck said as he started to walk back toward his car.

Agent Roberts watched as Agent Fastbeck walked strategically behind his car, then disappeared from sight.

A moment later, a large black swan emerged from behind the car, then took flight.

"We're just *normal* humans, aren't we." Agent Roberts said under his breath as he watched the swan fly away.

* * * * *

"How are things going here?" Agent Roberts asked as he approached.

"Paul and G are just acclimating to their relics. Should we wait for Agent Fastbeck to return before beginning?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"I'm sure he would have warned us if anyone were likely to have a problem with it."

"Yes. I'm sure that he would have." Professor Everstone agreed, then turned to the students and said, "Disregard what your eyes tell you and see if you can follow the elemental magic to the edge of the barrier."

Agent Roberts had expected the students to walk up the road that they had arrived on to where the illusion was, but instead, they began walking between the cars toward the treeline.

As Agent Roberts began to walk, he turned to Professor Everstone and asked, "So the 'actual' barrier isn't where the illusion is?"

"No, the illusion is projected by the barrier, making the area of influence seem far greater than it actually is."

"I remember you saying something about this barrier making people not want to go near it or something like that. Do you have everything you'll need to deal with a barrier that can affect people that way?" Agent Roberts asked carefully as he did his best to spot anything that could be used as a landmark, in case he ended up having to lead the way back.

"You're surprisingly observant, Agent Roberts. It turns out that if we end up having to modify that component of the spelling, that we may very well have to call in reinforcements." Professor Everstone said gravely as he kept pace with the group.

"But you have everything that you'll need to make that determination right here and now?" Agent Roberts asked in a leading tone.

"Another astute observation." Professor Everstone said in an impressed tone, then explained, "Miss Oaken has the rudimentary knowledge and skills to evaluate the spell. She, however, does not have the skills or knowledge to recast the spell, should that be necessary."

"If you're going to need someone else brought in, let me know as soon as possible. I have a satellite phone with me and we can call Mr. Darroch immediately."

"I will keep that in mind. Regardless of whether we need to call for reinforcements or not, I need to bring Mr. Darroch up-to-date on the status of our project. He needs to be aware of the change in scope."

"From what I've seen of him, I'm guessing that he'll also want to know that his sons are doing okay."

"Yes. Even if everything were going exactly to plan, it would be worth making the call just for that."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts noticed a chill on his skin from a light breeze and the diminished light from the canopy of leaves. The 'path' to his right seemed to be better lit and more inviting than the one to his left.

Paul, G, Zanner and Dex seemed to be drawn unerringly toward their common goal and took the left path without hesitation.

As suddenly as the chill had come over him, it left.

"Professor, you might want to watch out. I think this thing might be trying to control us or trick us in some way." Agent Roberts warned.

"What makes you suspect that?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's the charm that the boys made for me to keep me from being tricked by Jen's illusions. Whatever it is, it feels to me like there's something whispering in my ear and nudging me

in the direction that it wants me to go." Agent Roberts said as he tried to articulate his feelings.

"It's hard to say whether we're immune since we're witches or if we're fully under the enchantment and don't realize it."

"Filipe. Can you help me for a minute?"

"What can I do for you, Agent Roberts?" Filipe asked as he eagerly approached and fell into step with them.

"You know the spell you put on the necklace for me? Would you cast it again right now, on yourself?"

"Do you think we're caught in an illusion?"

"More of a subtle mind control. Go ahead and cast the spell and see if I'm right." Agent Roberts suggested.

As he watched, Filipe cast the familiar spell, using both words and gestures. Agent Roberts was a little concerned that Filipe was so engrossed in his spellcasting that he might not be aware of his footing as they continued to walk.

After Filipe had finished, Agent Roberts cautiously asked, "Can you feel any difference?"

"Yeah. It's showing us what we want to see." Filipe said slowly.

"Do you think that we're being misled from our goal?" Professor Everstone asked with concern.

"I don't know. If you want, I can try to join with the elemental water and see if I'm seeing the same thing that Paul does." Filipe suggested cautiously.

"Let me try something first." Agent Roberts said as he stopped walking.

"Guys! Hold up a minute." Filipe called after them.

"It's just up ahead. We're almost there." Paul complained.

"If Agent Roberts is right, it's always going to be 'just up ahead'. Hang on for a minute, okay?"

Paul, G, Zanner and Dex all stopped and slowly walked back to where everyone else had gathered around Agent Roberts.

"With all of you knowing about magic and stuff, I know that this is going to sound really silly, but if what I'm thinking is right, this could actually work." Agent Roberts explained to the group.

"Go ahead. Do as you will." Professor Everstone encouraged.

Agent Roberts looked around the group and felt nothing but their complete faith in him.

"*In the pain of birth, in the pain of growth, in the pain of achieving maturity, in the name of the horned god of the animals, I humbly ask that we be granted entry to this, your sanctuary. We are the harbingers of the next age.*" Agent Roberts carefully said as he watched to see if anything were going to happen.

"Whoah! How did you do that?" Paul asked in astonishment as he looked around.

"What happened? I'm wearing the charm you made for me so I couldn't see any difference." Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I didn't know anything was wrong before, but when you cast that spell, the false world melted away and now we're standing here in reality." Paul said as he looked around.

"*How* did you do that?" Filipe demanded to know.

"And *what* did you do?" Paul asked more reasonably.

"I took what I'd witnessed at the other two barriers and applied it to this one. I figured that I would say my little poem and either it would work or nothing would happen. All things considered, I think it was worth the risk." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"But you're a *human*." Dex said slowly.

"Yes, but so are Agent Fastbeck and Archdruid Highley and they can both open barriers." Agent Roberts said reasonably.

"But Agent Fastbeck has been imbued with god power and Archdruid Highley has an angelic enchantment." Paul slowly explained.

"True. But I've had my shadow stolen. I don't know if you need a full-blast enchantment on you or if you just need to have been 'touched' by magic for it to work."

"...because if you tried and it didn't work, we'd be no worse off." Filipe said thoughtfully.

"Right. Now that the illusion's been broken, we can find the 'real' edge of the barrier."

"Hold on. Before we do that, where did you come up with the words for the spell?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"I made them up. I just made sure that my poem contained the same elements as the poems that Conrad and Archdruid Highley used."

"From the look of it, you would've made a pretty good witch." Paul said with a grin.

"Why would I want to do that? I'm doing just fine with what I've got."

"You certainly are!" Professor Everstone said with a delighted chuckle which spread to the rest of the group.

"The edge of the barrier is over this way." Paul said as he started walking off in a different direction.

Without acknowledgement or complaint, the rest of the group automatically followed.

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts, would you mind saying your 'poem' again? I'd like to watch you while you do it." Paul asked cautiously.

"I didn't even think of that. Me too!" Filipe said quickly.

"Um, sure." Agent Roberts cautiously responded, then did his best to recite the 'poem' from memory.

After doing so, Paul broke into a grand smile and said, "I knew it! It's demonic!"

"What?!" Agent Roberts asked with surprise.

"Since you hadn't been imbued with magic to be able to cast a spell, I wondered what kind of magical flavor your 'poem' would have. It looks like you leeched some of the magic from the charm we made for you and *that's* what fueled the spell to open the barrier for us." Paul explained.

"It wasn't *just* demonic magic, but instead of it being my 'plain' magic, that's the same as everyone else's, Paul's demonic magic being in there made it so that there's no chance of it being anything else." Filipe added.

"So what does that mean for me? Did I kill the charm or gain the ability to do magic or something?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"No. You're just like you were before. But since you were willing to take a chance and try something different, you proved how the barrier locks work." Paul said simply.

"And that helps us with working on the barriers. Now that we know how the locking spell is made, we'll have a better chance of making it so that the next people who work on the barriers won't have any problems because we messed up the locks." Filipe said seriously.

"Guys! I think this is it!" Zanner said from ahead of them.

"Oops! I'm on duty. We'll talk later." Paul said before dashing away.

"I had my concerns about bringing a group of younger students instead of only choosing from the 'senior' talent pool. I'm glad that I

ended up listening to my instincts." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"I think we're all glad of that." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

* * * * *

"G, what do you see?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Not only is there a ton of air manipulation here, but a lot of sorcery too."

"Do you think that Miss Knawld will be able to help you in deciphering what you're seeing?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Yeah. And I think I'll probably need Paul and Filipe to help me when they're done with their water stuff. This is *insane*!"

"What about Zanner and Dex?"

"Unless they've figured out how to read spells outside their specialty, they probably won't be able to do much. But considering what they did yesterday, I think they've probably earned some down time. We should be able to handle this." G said seriously.

"That's a very good point. Why don't we let them get their part out of the way while you take the time to fully investigate what's before you."

"That sounds like a good idea. There's a lot of it and I don't want to miss anything." G agreed.

"What do you want me to do?" Corabeth asked cautiously.

"If you don't mind, would you focus on the primary 'air' spells while I'm digging into the sorcery? You don't have to do anything but identify what they're for at this point. We'll go back and figure out how they work when Professor Everstone is ready for us."

"Yes. I can do that." Corabeth said confidently.

"Thanks. That'll help a lot." G said appreciatively, then he turned and asked, "Paul, could you help me out with something before you get in too deep?"

"Yeah. Sure. What do you need?"

"Shelter." G said frankly.

"What?"

"This is going to take everything that I've got and when I go full-out, I don't want to be drenched in rain for however long it takes to go through all these spells. If you could lend me a little of your water, I have a spell in mind that will make it so none of us will have to get wet.

"Sounds great. Just tell me what I have to do." Paul said with interest.

"Give me a stone tablet so I can write out the full spell for you. We'll have to synchronize it to make it work, but it'll be worth it."

Paul made a casual gesture and a stone wall erupted from the ground, just the same as the table and benches had at the campsite and at Nevermore.

G stepped forward and placed one finger on the stone and glowing writing began to appear.

Agent Roberts tried to read it, but was completely lost halfway through the first sentence.

"Where did you come up with this?" Paul asked with surprise.

"Research project. Unfortunately, since I don't have any talent for water, all I could do was write about it. I've always wanted to try it."

"I can see why. It's like a perfect blend of illusions and elemental manipulations."

"Yeah. It's not often that one of my spells ends up creating something 'real'." G said regretfully.

"Is that all of it?" Paul asked when the writing seemed to have stopped.

"Yeah. I've been through this thing a zillion times, so we can do it whenever you're ready." G said easily.

"Alright. Let's do it." Paul said confidently.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts watched the truly magical sight in wonder.

As Paul held the chalice and G held the spear, they cast their spell, using different words but the same exact cadence.

At times it seemed that one would finish the other's sentence or complete their thought, although Agent Roberts was well past the point of following what either of them were saying.

Cold wind began to blow and the fallen rain around them began to swirl and form different shapes.

Agent Roberts remembered a warning that he had received about witches sometimes getting lost in the spectacle of casting a difficult or exceptionally well-crafted spell.

He believed that he was seeing that play out in front of him, however he couldn't find any fault with it. The boys were consumed with their spellcasting and joyful in their ability to create something magical and new.

As the spiralling swirling streams of water began to slow, Agent Roberts realized that the cold air was causing the water to freeze in place.

Before his amazed eyes, a beautiful little gazebo appeared, right there in the clearing in the forest.

"I'm going to miss this spear when we're done. That was AWESOME!" G giggled with delight.

"Mr. Bentley Brown may have to fight me for the chalice, too." Paul said with a laugh, then looked in Mr. Bentley Brown's direction and quietly said, "Kidding."

Agent Roberts could have sworn that he almost spotted a smile on the dour man's face, but to Mr. Bentley Brown's credit, he was civil enough to give a nod of acknowledgement to Paul to assure him that no offence had been taken.

Not only was the gazebo that the boys created a very practical and functional thing to have in the persistent rain, but it was also an undeniable work of art.

"I heard that you had participated in cooperative spelling, but I didn't expect to see an example of it on this excursion of ours. Very well done." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"Now that we don't have to worry about being rained on, I guess it's time for us to get to work." G said as he stepped to the front of the gazebo and sat down.

Agent Roberts stepped under the roof of the gazebo and closed his umbrella. Considering that the gazebo was made of ice, he had expected to be feeling chilled, but as it turned out, he didn't notice anything like that at all.

"Corabeth? Are you ready?" G asked calmly.

"Yes." Corabeth answered as she settled at G's side.

"I guess we're next." Paul said as he sat beside Corabeth.

"Don't start without me." Filipe said as he hurried to Paul's side.

"Ready?" Zanner asked Dex cautiously.

"Yeah. I think I am." Dex said with an easy smile for him.

All six of the teenagers fell silent as they concentrated on the clearing before them.

Even though Agent Roberts had the necklace to dispel any illusions, he still couldn't see anything where they were looking.

"Professor. This is the same earth that we had at the protectorate." Zanner said slowly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. You know how Paul and Filipe are always talking about the 'flavor' of certain magic. Well, I can't see like they do, but I can recognize patterns. This is the same earth that was being processed at the protectorate. There's no doubt."

"It's the same water, too." Paul confirmed.

"And, as expected, the air apparatus is quite extensive at this site, so that it will be capable of supporting the other two." Professor Everstone said with a nod.

"How does the air get there?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"What was that?" Professor Everstone responded.

"How does the air that's processed here get to the other two colonies?"

"Magic."

"I'm just trying to understand. Is it like folded space where air that's processed here is suddenly there, or does it travel through a pipe or a wormhole or an interdimensional portal? How does it get from here to there?"

"I have my suspicions, but I haven't verified them as yet. Would you be interested to hear what I believe?"

"Yes. I really would."

"Are you familiar with the theory of bilocation?"

"Someone being in two places at once? I've heard of it, but I don't even begin to understand what they're claiming, much less if it's true or not."

"This is something like that, except instead of a person being in more than one place, it's a place being in more than one place." Professor Everstone said carefully.

Agent Roberts thought for a moment, then slowly said, "So, if the processed air is being sealed away... let's say it's being kept in a balloon somewhere. That balloon actually exists simultaneously in three different places and the people in all three places can draw from it?"

"I'm surprised that you got that so easily. Many of my students who have witnessed a physical demonstration of the principle still couldn't grasp the concept."

"So, if what you've got here is really a case of bilocation or multilocation, then how does that figure into what's happening in Waxell?"

"I'm going to tell you something that I probably shouldn't, but I believe that you've earned the right to hear the truth."

"What is it?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"I will have to ask that you not tell the others that I told you this. Will you promise?" Professor Everstone asked as he looked around to account for the other adults.

"Yes. You have my word." Agent Roberts promised.

"You asked how the bilocation of elements effects Waxell. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"My answer is... I. Don't. Know."

"What?"

"While it may seem obvious from your point of view that some sort of leakage or contamination from one or all of the barriers might have contributed to the result in Waxell, the gods' honest truth is that I don't have any idea of how or why that is."

"So you don't think that it's a 'feature' built into the three-way colony structure?"

"Again, I don't know. I suppose that it's possible, although I can't begin to speculate as to what the motive might be for doing such a thing."

"So, if you don't know what's causing the Waxell situation, then I'm guessing that you don't know if fixing these barriers is going to stop it." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"That is correct." Professor Everstone confirmed.

"Can we leave the barriers the way they are? I mean, just slap a fresh coat of 'keep out' on the Southseid barrier and walk away?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"Kicking the can down the road not only doesn't solve the problem, it's none to good for the can." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"You realize that by continuing this, you're endangering a lot of lives, don't you?"

"Yes. I am quite aware of that."

"It's not too late to call in a group of experts to take a look at this and do it safely." Agent Roberts quietly suggested.

"If you care about the people of Waxell, you'd do well not to wish 'experts' upon them. I dare say that they will not improve the situation." Professor Everstone said gravely.

"If they find out that there's a 'leakage', not only will they want to fix the leak, but also get rid of the evidence that the leak had ever happened."

"Some things aren't so different between our societies. A bureaucrat is still a bureaucrat." Professor Everstone said regretfully.

"I thought you guys would have come up with a spell to deal with that by now." Agent Roberts said with a grin.

"Not as yet, but one can still hope."

"Okay. I'll stop beating the drum to call in additional help but I'm really serious about not wanting the people of Waxell to be hurt."

"I understand that and I share in the sentiment."

"Thank you Professor. Just knowing *that* makes me feel a lot better."

"Just remember your promise."

"My what? Oh, yeah. Don't worry. I won't tell anyone that I asked you a question and you didn't know the answer." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

"No problem. Besides, who'd believe me, anyway?"

"Professor, are you ready?" Zanner called from ahead of them.

"Yes. You may begin."

Chapter 27

Even though Agent Roberts didn't understand exactly what Zanner was describing, he noticed that the young teenager spoke with more confidence than he had the previous day and was able to perform the evaluation without prompting from Mr. Hansen or Professor Everstone.

Once Zanner had completed his report, Paul and Filipe gave their evaluation.

Agent Roberts was impressed by the display of 'teamwork' that they demonstrated. Paul would succinctly describe one of the spells in his 'bullet point' style and when he was finished, Filipe would take over the presentation, giving more detail and describing any interaction with other spells that were used. The way they 'tag-teamed' their delivery was nothing short of professional and seemed to be even more efficient than the previous day's report. Agent Roberts couldn't be more proud of them if they were his own sons.

Once Paul and Filipe concluded their presentation, it was time for the 'main event'.

"Corabeth? You got this?" G asked when it was their turn.

"Be ready to jump in when I'm done with the dispensation spell." Corabeth cautioned him.

"You can count on me." G assured her.

Taking him at his word, Corabeth began to relay her observations about how the differing spell structures were organized and the importance of each of their basic functions.

Agent Roberts was surprised to realize that her descriptions were so vivid that he actually got a sense of what she was talking about.

No one else spoke a word, out of respect for Corabeth and the outstanding job that she was doing.

When she finally concluded, G took over the narrative without interruption. It was notable that although he sounded as professional as any of the others, his face had taken on the full fledged appearance of a wicked, smirking clown.

Agent Roberts' attention was drawn to a movement and he caught sight of Agent Fastbeck in his half-transformed state, entering the gazebo.

Neither spoke and it was silently agreed that they would wait until G was finished.

As G was talking, not only was Agent Roberts completely lost as to what he was saying, but he got the feeling that everyone except Professor Everstone was right there with him in his confusion. Whatever it was seemed to be very technical and precise.

When G brought his presentation to a close, Agent Fastbeck stepped forward and said, "I've talked to the elders and told them what you're doing. They've asked that before you do anything to the barrier that you inform them of what changes that you're intending to make."

"That seems like a reasonable request." Professor Everstone said easily.

"Did you have any trouble finding us?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"It took a few minutes of searching, but your little ice house was easy enough to spot from the air."

"Well, your timing is impeccable. We've just finished the evaluation. Our next step will be to return to Agent Roberts home and discuss what we've been able to uncover at all three sites."

"It's nearly lunchtime and I don't have enough food in store at my house to feed everyone. We'll either need to go to the store for

supplies or take the kids back to the Waxell Diner." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Actually, why don't you have lunch at the Brynnhollow Tavern? You can use their private dining room to discuss your business and you won't have to bother with hiding who and what you are or watching what you say."

"I was given to understand that the residents of the Brynn colony were isolated from the outer world. I wouldn't want for us to be responsible for their cultural contamination." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"They *are* isolated, but that's more a matter of their circumstances than anything. They're aware of their own situation and the existence of the outside world. The fact of the matter is that their isolation is more about keeping outsiders from finding out about them. Since you already know about them, there shouldn't be an issue." Agent Fastbeck carefully explained.

"In matters regarding the Brynns, you have the most current knowledge. So, in the absence of other considerations, I see no reason for us to opt for the more inconvenient choice."

"Before you call it settled, you should know that we're going to have to hike for a little bit to get there." Agent Fastbeck thought to warn them.

"We're all dressed for hiking. And I'm sure that knowing that there's food at our destination will keep the younger members of our party from raising too much of a fuss." Agent Roberts assured him with a smile.

Professor Everstone turned and found everyone waiting to hear what verdict he had reached.

"We will be hiking into Brynnhollow to have a meal and discuss our findings thus far." Professor Everstone said to the group.

"Do you think we'll be able to see our friends, Cain and Deimos, while we're there?" G asked hopefully.

"I'm not aware enough of the logistics of the situation to be able to speculate on that." Professor Everstone said, then turned to Agent Fastbeck with a look of question.

"We'll just have to wait and see how things go when we get there." Agent Fastbeck told the boys quietly.

"Does anyone need to do anything before we leave?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked around the group.

When no one immediately answered, Agent Roberts started walking as he said, "Let's go."

* * * * *

Although the sky was still heavily overcast, the rain had finally stopped.

The group first hiked back to the cars, where Agent Fastbeck had left his clothes. They were still on the ground beside his car and thoroughly soaked. Shawn was apologetic when he realized that it hadn't occurred to him to gather Agent Fastbeck's clothes so that he would have them later.

Agent Fastbeck dismissed the apology with a smile as he got another set of clothes out of the trunk of his car.

Once he had transformed to his fully human form and dressed, the group started the long cross country trek toward Brynnhollow.

* * * * *

There wasn't much conversation as the group hiked through the woods and across vast open fields.

Some were still processing what they had discovered about the barrier or were mentally preparing for the upcoming meeting. Others were simply enjoying a long relaxing walk in the

breathtaking scenery. After the long rain, everything seemed so fresh and clean that it was inspiring.

"How are you doing, Mr. Bentley Brown?" Agent Roberts asked quietly.

"I'm not used to this level of physical activity, but I am interested to know what plans they have for the use of The Third Grail."

"As I understand it, the professor is going to allow the students to evaluate what they've been able to discover about the barriers and then encourage them to develop plans to upgrade them."

"Although I've been impressed by Paul's power and control, I'm concerned that his inexperience may cause him to be overwhelmed when confronted with a truly massive spelling project."

"I understand that your concern is primarily for the relic, but maybe the best way to protect the relic will be to offer Paul advice based on your own experience so that he can prepare himself and have realistic expectations."

"I'm only here to protect The Third Grail, not to participate."

"To me it seems that the best way to protect the relic might be to see that it is used properly. Unless I miss my guess, you're the one with the most knowledge about the relic's use and capabilities. What good are you going to be doing by withholding that knowledge?"

"Let's see what plans they come up with. If I notice a flaw in their reasoning, I will offer my expertise on the subject."

"I'm sure that everyone will appreciate that."

* * * * *

"There it is." Agent Fastbeck said as they crested a rise.

Agent Roberts looked down upon the quaint little village and marvelled at seeing something so picturesque in real life.

It *was* like a dream.

"So even though these people are aware of technology, they make the conscious decision not to adopt it themselves, even to the point of not using motor vehicles?" Professor Everstone asked slowly.

"They choose not to use electricity, either." Agent Fastbeck said informatively, then added, "A few families have generators, but see no point in using them. They already have everything that they need and see no advantage to replacing what works with something unfamiliar. I've only seen them turn the street lights on once, during the Samhain Celebration."

"I wonder if this has something to do with the spells carried by the earth, air and water elements within the barriers." Professor Everstone said speculatively as they walked toward the town.

"If it does, is anything that you're thinking of doing likely to change it?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"No plans have been made, as of yet. The better question might be, will we be able to recognize which modifications to the barriers might unintentionally alter conditions *within* the barriers." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"I hope you won't be mad if I stick my nose in where it doesn't belong while I'm trying to protect these people." Agent Roberts said frankly as he glanced at Agent Fastbeck, at his side.

"As I understand it, that's one of the primary reasons that you were included on this expedition; to watch out for the interests of those not directly involved in the project." Professor Everstone said seriously.

"Yes. Mr. Darroch explained that to me, but at the time I had no idea that I'd end up being responsible for the Brynns, the Wudewas, the Nephilim *and* the residents of Waxell. I'm just a regular human being. They deserve someone better to watch out for them." Agent Roberts quietly responded.

"You opened the barrier. How many *regular* human beings do you know who can do that?" Professor Everstone asked firmly.

"Two, actually."

"I suppose that's true." Professor Everstone said with a reluctant smile, then continued, "But it seems to me that you're in some rather impressive company. What's more, if all goes to plan, none of those people whom you have been tasked to protect will ever be aware of what you're doing on their behalf. If done right, this will *literally* be a 'thankless' job. Knowing that, who *else* would you suggest take up this responsibility?"

"Don't worry. I'm not trying to get out of it. I just felt like I had to point out that these people might do a whole lot better with someone else watching out for them."

Professor Everstone slowly nodded, then said, "I can't say if you will be up to it or not, but what's important right now is that you're willing to take up the challenge."

After a slight pause as they walked, Agent Fastbeck cautiously asked, "You opened the barrier?"

"I unlocked it so that they could find the edge of the actual barrier instead of chasing the artificial projection." Agent Roberts explained.

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you Shawn?" Agent Fastbeck asked with a grin.

"I'm just as surprised as anyone else."

* * * * *

The group fell into silence as Agent Fastbeck led the way into town.

To Agent Roberts it was like taking a step into history. Although he had become somewhat familiar with the sensation due to his time in Waxell, the wonder overtook him anew at walking into the late nineteenth century town.

"The tavern's over here." Agent Fastbeck said to draw the attention of those looking around in wonder.

It took a minute, but he was finally able to get the entire group herded inside.

* * * * *

"Arv, is there any chance that we can use your private dining room for a few hours?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he walked up to the bar.

"Of course. Just go on in and make yourselves comfortable. Talbot will be with you in a few minutes."

"Thanks Arv. Please give my apologies to Carn if he decides to convene a lunch meeting for the elders."

"As far as I know they aren't meeting today, but if they do show up, it will do them some good to have things switched up a bit." Arv chuckled.

Agent Fastbeck smiled at the response as he led the way toward the back of the tavern.

* * * * *

Once they had entered the private dining room, everyone filled in around the table and made themselves comfortable.

Agent Roberts noticed that both Dex and Filipe maneuvered themselves so that they could end up being seated on either side of him.

"Since I'm not taking part in your project, would you like for me to leave you alone while you discuss your plans?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he remained standing.

"While it may be necessary for us to exclude you from whatever actions we eventually decide upon, you have the most knowledge of the Brynns and the surrounding area. Your insights will, no doubt, be invaluable in planning the most appropriate course of action." Professor Everstone said confidently.

"I'll be happy to do whatever I can." Agent Fastbeck said solemnly as he took his seat.

"Everyone, why don't you go ahead and look at your menus and decide what you'd like to have before we begin our discussion?" Professor Everstone asked casually.

"What language is this?" Paul asked cautiously as he looked at the menu he had taken from the middle of the table.

"Oh. I forgot about that." Agent Fastbeck chuckled, then said, "From what I've been told, it's an amalgamation of Gaelic, Welsh and some severely bastardized English. When the waiter comes in you can ask him to help you decide what you want."

"I can understand lots of languages, but this makes no sense to me." Paul said frankly.

"I want to be sure that you know that while Talbot wouldn't intentionally steer you wrong, he's from here and might not immediately understand what you're asking for. When you order anything, you need to keep in mind that we're in the mountains of Kentucky, just about as far from the ocean as it's possible to get. So if Talbot suggests anything called *oysters*, they're not seafood."

Confused looks passed amongst the teenagers, but none of them asked for an explanation.

"It sounds like you've had some personal experience with that particular misunderstanding." Agent Roberts said with a grin.

"I don't want to talk about it." Agent Fastbeck growled.

"I believe that if you'll tell the waiter what you're hungry for, he might be able to suggest a close approximation." Mr. Hansen said simply.

"That sounds like a reasonable way to proceed." Professor Everstone said as he fought valiantly to restrain a grin.

* * * * *

By the time Talbot entered the dining room, everyone had already decided what kind of food they had an appetite for.

There was some rather amusing confusion when G requested Buffalo Wings, but after a brief explanation, Talbot assured him that Arvin, the tavern owner, would come up with something to satisfy his taste.

Once their orders had been placed, Professor Everstone stood and said, "I believe that all of us have a reasonable grasp of the spells and powers at work within the barriers, so unless anyone feels that they need a recap of what has been discovered thus far, I recommend that we dispense with the review and proceed directly to the matter of how to modify the existing barriers to sufficiently protect their inhabitants."

Professor Everstone paused a moment for anyone who might want to object, then continued, "Very well, then I suppose the next step would be to open the table to suggestions and recommendations."

"Before we get too deep into it, I just wanted to tell you that I've got a list of proposed modifications from my technomagic teacher. Some of the things won't work the way he has them, but they're really good ideas and I bet that if we work together we can come up with something that we can use."

"What do you have in mind?" Miss Oaken asked curiously.

"Well, Brynnhollow has an illusion in place to hide it from satellites. Nevermore is folded out of our space, so we don't have to worry about that. But we need to make an illusion or something for the Southseid barrier. The problem is, to do it right, the illusion spell would have to be based in water instead of air."

"When I'm done with the Brynn barrier I could go over and do an air based sorcery for them." G interjected.

"What would you power it with? All the air element spells draw on the Brynn air. The only way to do it right would be with a purely

water based spell, otherwise it would run out of power and collapse in just a few years." Paul said firmly.

"Let's table that for the moment while we present other projects. Once we have everything on the table, then we can go back and start working toward solutions." Professor Everstone suggested.

"I think we're going to need Corabeth's wall of force woven into the Brynn barrier." G said simply.

"Why do you believe that?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"All their defenses are mental. That's great if you're dealing with people, but what about drones? Unless I'm missing something big, there's nothing stopping a remote controlled device from going directly to downtown Brynnhollow." G explained.

"Southseid has something like a wall of force, it just needs to be extended to protect them from above." Paul added.

"What about Nevermore?" Dex asked timidly.

"Given that the barrier is located within a spacial rift, it is effectively concealed. That being the case, I can see no benefit being derived by adding a 'wall of force' to something that doesn't fully manifest in our reality. So, assuming that we're going to continue to use the folded space pocket that's been created, the priority would seem to be to verify the barrier's integrity. As it is, one weakness could allow an unwitting person to pass from this reality into theirs without warning." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"I don't know enough about multidimensional manipulations to be able to do anything like that." Zanner said weakly.

"Mr. Hansen might be willing to help you with that, if you asked him nicely." Professor Everstone said with less humor under his words than such a phrase might normally imply.

"But do you mean that you're expecting 'us' to upgrade the barrier all by ourselves?" Zanner asked nervously.

"We normally don't resort to the use of relics unless there is a legitimate need. This isn't a field trip for you to 'observe'. You're here to do a *real* job. What's more, if you do it badly, there will be *real* consequences for *real* people." Professor Everstone said firmly to both Zanner and Dex.

Not only Dex and Zanner gawked at the professor. All in attendance were silent as they anxiously waited for what he was going to do or say next.

"Although this project has grown far beyond what any of us could have reasonably expected, I believe that we have the knowledge, the power and the talent necessary to successfully complete our tasks." Professor Everstone said to the group as a whole.

There was a slight tapping on the dining room door which preceded Talbot and a young woman walking into the room with trays of drinks.

"Hilda? I didn't expect to see you here." Agent Fastbeck said with pleasant surprise.

"I just came down off the mountain to visit with my dad for a bit, and wouldn't you know, I'd get put to work." Hilda said with a chuckle as she held her tray steady while Talbot hurried to place drinks around the table.

"Well, when you go back, tell everyone that I said 'hi' and that Andrea and I will probably be visiting before too long." Agent Fastbeck said warmly.

"I'll be sure to tell them." Hilda said as she looked around the room at all the unfamiliar faces.

"Everyone, this is Hilda, one of the witches from the mountain. Hilda, these are the teachers and the students who've been sent to give the Brynnhollow barrier a checkup... Oh, and Agent Shawn Roberts. He's been assigned to work with me at my office in Waxell."

"You'll have to tell us all about it when you visit." Hilda said as she watched Talbot place the last few drinks.

"I'll do that." Agent Fastbeck promised.

"It's nice to meet all of you. Enjoy your time in Brynnhollow." Hilda said before following Talbot out of the room.

* * * * *

"Now, where were we?" Professor Everstone asked as he looked around.

"I was thinking that if Corabeth wouldn't mind, maybe she could show me her 'wall of force' spell so that I could try to adapt it to work for the Southseid barrier." Paul said thoughtfully.

"My 'wall of force' is based in air. Unless you can do high-level air manipulations, I don't think you could use it." Corabeth quietly explained.

"No. I can't do air. But if you can show me how your spell works, there might be a way that I can make a water spell that does basically the same thing."

"Do you need the full version? I usually do most of it mentally."

"Yes. I'll need the words and the gestures, too. I'm not going to be copying you, I'm going to be seeing what you're causing the air to do so that maybe I can do the same thing."

"Can't you just use your alchemy spell on the air like you do when you're making a stone wall?" G asked curiously.

"Actually, I thought about that too. But that spell is temporary and requires me to maintain it. As soon as I lose concentration, it drops. From what little I've seen of Corabeth's spell, it's enduring. If I can find a way to cast something like that based in water, then I have a chance of making something that will actually be able to protect the Wudewas from outside forces." Paul said seriously.

"Professor? Is it okay if I go ahead and show Paul now so that he can be thinking about what changes he needs to make?" Corabeth asked uncertainly.

"Yes. If you'll step to the other side of the room, we'll continue our discussion while you're doing that." Professor Everstone said decisively.

Paul and Corabeth both got up from their chairs and moved to the far side of the room where cushioned chairs and a low table were located near the fireplace, in sort of a conversation area.

"While they're doing that, perhaps we should further discuss the weaknesses and possible modifications of the Nevermore barrier." Professor Everstone said as he turned his attention to Zanner and Dex.

"Okay. But if you're *really* going to count on us to figure this out, then I think the first thing would have to be to bring the barrier completely into our space. If we tried to work on it while it was folded, it would be possible for the spells to interact and make the space pocket crash and kill everyone inside." Zanner said carefully.

"Yes. In manipulating extra-dimensional space, that is always a possibility." Mr. Hansen confirmed.

"Once we bring it into our space, then I think we need to do like Professor Everstone said and make sure that the dimensional rift is working the way it's supposed to. That thing about someone accidentally walking into it... we need to make sure that can't happen."

"Mr. Hansen has the knowledge and skills to be able to evaluate the rift for you."

"It's been a few years, but I still remember what goes where." Mr. Hansen confirmed.

"Good. Because I don't know how to do any of that stuff. But after that, I think the next thing we're going to need to do is make the

Nevermore barrier just as strong as the other two. I don't know a whole lot about space folds, but I know that they're not always the strongest spells around; they can fail."

"While there are a number of things that can potentially go wrong with multidimensional spells, the pocket dimension that they created seems to be perfectly stable." Mr. Hansen observed.

"Yeah. But just because it's stable now doesn't mean that it's going to stay that way. And besides that, even if it works exactly the way it's supposed to that doesn't mean that no one is going to try to get into it."

"Or out of it." Dex quietly added.

"Yeah. I hadn't thought about it, but that's right. Someone on either side of the pocket could cause it to crash. If they didn't wink out of existence, then they'd be stuck in our reality without any protection at all." Zanner said gravely.

"You've made your point." Professor Everstone interrupted.

Zanner already had his mouth open to say something more, but snapped it shut at the Professor's words.

"The residents of 'Evermore' are lucky to have you watching out for them." Professor Everstone said more gently, then continued, "What steps do you believe should be taken to adequately protect your charges?"

"If we could do it, I'd like to do everything that they have at the other two barriers, but I know that there's no way we can do a mind control spell to lure people away from it." Zanner said thoughtfully.

"Yes. That would be exceedingly difficult." Professor Everstone agreed.

"But with the power of earth, I think we can make a physical barrier, like they have surrounding the Wudewas valley. We can weave a magical barrier into that, making it so that someone who

doesn't know better will just think that the weeds and vines are too tough to be cut."

"Yes. That sounds perfectly reasonable."

"I think after that we'll need to make a wall of force or something to keep anyone from getting in by air. That's going to be a little bit harder." Zanner said slowly.

"Admittedly, Earth manipulations aren't my forte, but I can't think of any likely spells to use for that." Professor Everstone said reluctantly, then looked toward Mr. Hansen.

"Given the occupants of the barrier, you might possibly consider using a variant of the angelic sanctity spells to provide another level of protection." Mr. Hansen said thoughtfully.

"Are you talking about making the entire barrier zone 'hallowed ground'?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Yes. Rather than attempting to adapt an air based protection spell to work through the earth element, we could cast an overarching protection spell on the whole barrier region. It should end up performing the same function with quite a bit less chance for failure due to unstable and untested spells." Mr. Hansen said slowly.

"To my knowledge, none in our party would be capable of casting such an enchantment." Professor Everstone said regretfully.

"That's true. But it really seems like the solution best suited to our situation. It might be worth calling in outside help to see that the job is done correctly." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"You make a good point. Given what we know about the barrier and its occupants, the 'Hallowed Ground' spell would be the ideal solution." Professor Everstone agreed.

"Archdruid Highley could probably cast the enchantment if we gave him access to the power to do it." Dex said in realization.

Agent Roberts looked around during the long moment of silence as everyone seemed to be considering what Dex had just suggested.

Finally, Professor Everstone slowly said, "He *is* a Druid. He already *has* an angelic enchantment. If he'd be willing to do it, theoretically it *could* work."

"Is this going to be more dangerous than doing it ourselves?" Agent Roberts felt compelled to ask.

"No. Actually, this would be quite a bit *less* dangerous." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"If Zanner will cast the spell to give Archdruid Highley access to the power of the earth through Dex, then everything that follows would be in Archdruid Highley's hands. The boys would only have to maintain the flow of magical energy until Archdruid Highley completes his spell." Mr. Hansen explained.

"Do you trust Archdruid Highley?" Filipe asked quietly from Agent Roberts' side.

"I trust him more than I trust Milo, but that isn't saying much." Agent Roberts answered honestly.

"Do you trust him enough to allow him to bless the grounds within the barrier?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"Before I answer, I'd like a better idea of the dangers involved."

"The failure of the enchantment is the most likely negative outcome. If that were to happen, Archdruid Highley might suffer some sort of magical backlash, but there shouldn't be any other consequence." Professor Everstone said, then looked to Mr. Hansen for verification.

"That's right. Zanner and Dex wouldn't be in any danger from that and as far as the project, it wouldn't really hurt anything else that we're doing. We'd just be without that level of protection." Mr. Hansen confirmed.

"The only other negative outcome that I can foresee might be if Archdruid Highley were overcome by having access to so much magic. Without the natural inhibitions and life experiences of a witch, he could conceivably go mad with power and take any number of actions, possibly endangering the entire party." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"If that were to happen, would a bullet or two be likely to stop him?" Agent Roberts asked seriously.

After a moment to consider, Professor Everstone slowly said, "Yes. I believe so. We do our best to train our children to react appropriately and defend themselves in stressful situations. Archdruid Highley wouldn't have that training and would likely react to a sudden threat as any other mundane person would."

Before Agent Roberts could formulate any response to that, there was a tap on the door before it opened, revealing Talbot and Hilda with trays loaded with plates of food.

Chapter 28

"I thought I was getting chicken wings, I ended up with a *whole* chicken." G said in wonder.

"If it's too much, ask Talbot to wrap what's left so that you can save some for later." Agent Fastbeck suggested.

After a bite, G said past a mouthful of food, "Don't worry about it. This is so good I might be able to eat *two* whole chickens of it."

"How about everyone else? Did you get what you expected?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he looked around.

"I believe that this may be the biggest, thickest steak that I've ever been served." Mr. Hansen said as he stared at his plate in awe.

"Give it a try. I'll bet that it's probably the tenderest, too." Agent Fastbeck said with a smile.

"I'm not sure what this is that I'm eating, but it's really good." Filipe said from beside Agent Roberts.

"Just as long as you're enjoying it." Agent Roberts said fondly.

"I've had that before. It's cabbage rolls that have been baked into kind of a casserole. The name is completely unpronounceable, but it tastes like heaven."

"Yeah." Filipe easily agreed.

"So Paul, were you and Corabeth able to come up with anything in regard to your water-based wall of force?" Miss Oaken asked between bites of food.

"I think so. What do you think of this?" Paul asked as he made a quick, complicated gesture.

"Was that a water based alchemy transformation?" Miss Oaken asked slowly.

"Yeah. Try to take another bite of your food." Paul said simply.

Agent Roberts watched as Miss Oaken attempted to move her fork toward her plate, but was apparently prevented.

"I used alchemy to change the humidity in the air and some of Corabeth's 'wall of force' to make that changed humidity into an invisible barrier." Paul happily explained.

"It's not like a wall of force though. This is soft, like a pillow." Miss Oaken said with surprise.

"Yeah. Because of the force dynamics involved, I can't make it completely solid. But I've been thinking about it and I'm not sure that I need to. Anything that tried to fly or shoot into my barrier would bounce off. I'm pretty sure that it would stop anyone who tried to 'push' through it, too." Paul said seriously as he made a quick gesture and Miss Oaken was once again able to reach her food.

"After seeing how Paul did that, I worked on my 'wall of force' and was able to make it softer. I'd never thought of doing something like that before. I was always trying to make it stronger." Corabeth said happily.

"How do you think this will work in the Southseid barrier?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"It solves a few of our problems. Anyone attacking with drones or guns wouldn't be able to fire in from outside. But I still need to find something to defeat motion sensors, lasers and night vision." Paul said honestly.

"If you want to defeat motion sensors, you might look at getting rid of their shadows." Agent Roberts said simply.

"I hadn't thought of that." Paul muttered in surprise, then fell silent as he absently continued to eat his food.

Agent Roberts was fascinated by the expressions that flitted across Paul's face as he contemplated the new idea.

* * * * *

Many of the others around the table had started their own conversations, discussing detailed plans of what they were going to do to improve their barriers. However, Paul was silent and seemed to be unaware of the others around him.

As Agent Roberts continued to watch, Paul suddenly seemed to have an idea and reached into the air beside him and his arm seemed to disappear past the elbow.

"Mom would freak if she saw you doing that in public." G told his brother with a grin.

"I'm careful about who I do it in front of, but all of us are here because we're the best and we're being asked to give it our all. Now's not the time for me to be hiding my abilities." Paul said as he seemed to be searching for something with his missing hand.

"Pray tell, what are you doing Paul?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Agent Roberts may have just solved one of my problems, but I need something from my locker to make sure that it can work." Paul said as his hand came into view with a textbook in it.

"I wasn't aware that you had progressed to the level of making traversable portals." Professor Everstone said cautiously.

"Yeah. Well, I'm not quite there yet. I can only make little ones and only if I've left a spell diagram at the other end to link up to." Paul said as he opened his textbook and began searching for the section that he wanted.

"Even so, that's quite an achievement." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"Not really. An achievement takes hard work. This is just a talent that's strong in my family." Paul said absently as he tried to find what he was looking for.

"So, if I'm understanding correctly, you have a spell diagram inside your locker at school that you can link up to so that you have access to your school books no matter where you are?" Miss Oaken asked curiously.

"Yeah. But it's not as nerdy as it sounds. I just don't like having to go halfway across the school to trade out books between classes." Paul said distractedly as he kept the majority of his attention on his textbook.

Everyone seemed to be as curious as Agent Roberts as to what Paul was reading.

"You were right, Agent Roberts." Paul said suddenly as he looked up from his book.

"I was?"

"Yeah. At first I was trying to think of how to block someone who was using advanced technology from being able to see through the barrier. But the only things I could come up with would cause more problems than they would solve, mostly by leaving everyone inside the barrier in the dark. But when you said that thing about losing your shadow, it got me to thinking. Rather than trying to block the visible spectrum, I could tweak the enchantment on the 'wall of force' to magically diffuse the perception of shadows from within the barrier. That shouldn't do anything at all to the people inside, but someone looking in from outside with technology would only see emptiness because from a magical standpoint everything that they would be looking at would be considered 'reflections'." Paul carefully explained.

"What did you need to look up, if you don't mind me asking?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"I just wanted to confirm that the alchemy spells that I'd need to use could be done completely with elemental water. I figured that with all the reflection and refraction properties in water spells that I should be able to magically disperse reflections, but I wasn't one hundred percent sure."

"So it appears that you've been able to come up with effective shielding for the Southseid barrier." Professor Everstone said with a slight smile.

"Yes sir. It looks like I have." Paul said timidly.

"*That's* an achievement." G declared with pride for his brother.

"Yeah. It is." Paul reluctantly agreed.

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As Agent Roberts was enjoying his meal, he kept watch on all the kids to see how they were dealing with things.

Paul and G seemed to be thriving on being given new challenges to face, not that he was surprised by the revelation. He had already determined that both boys were brilliant, in different ways. Beyond that, they both had the drive to excel, not to show off their impressive abilities but to push themselves to do their absolute best.

Corabeth appeared to be rising to the occasion and it was a beautiful thing to see. It was almost like, right before his eyes, he could see her opening herself up to take her first tentative steps into the adult world of maturity and responsibility on her own terms.

Zanner, while not noticeably developing in maturity, seemed to be more confident in himself and had become more willing to take risks. Professor Everstone's words earlier seem to have driven home the point that Zanner had some measure of control of the situation and by extension, would bear responsibility for the consequences of his decisions. To his credit, Zanner didn't appear to be shying away from the responsibility, as one might expect. By all appearances he was devoting his full attention to every detail of what was going on so that he would be prepared to take action when called upon to do so.

Agent Roberts looked from Dex to Filipe on either side of him and although both had sought the additional security of sitting next to him, neither appeared to be having a problem dealing with the stress of the responsibilities being placed on them. After consideration, Agent Roberts accepted that people deal with things in their own ways. If the boys felt more secure being near him, he had no problem going along with it.

"Before we proceed, does anyone have any concerns of an astrological nature with what we're planning to do?" Professor Everstone asked, drawing all attention to him.

After a long pause, Mr. Hansen said, "I tend to keep watch on the astrological state in the event that it might impact the work of my students. The only astrological influence that I'm aware of at this time is that Mars is in retrograde, which might negatively impact fire based spells. But to my knowledge, that shouldn't have any effect on anything that we've been planning. Everything else should be reasonably stable."

"Thank you. It's always good to be aware of the prevailing climate before embarking on a challenging spelling project." Professor Everstone said soberly.

"Even though Mars is in retrograde, the demonic realms are unusually close to this plane right now. So if anyone needs fire, I should be able to help you out." Paul said frankly.

"Yes, regarding that, I don't recall if you've been notified. We have decided to enact a 'Holy Ground' protection spell within the Nevermore barrier to serve as an additional layer of defense, should the pocket dimension be deactivated or breached. You will need to keep in mind that the entire Nevermore colony will be toxic to you from this point forward." Professor Everstone warned.

"Actually, I had assumed that it was toxic to me before, since the Nephilim live there. But either way, I'll be sure to steer clear of it."

"Miss Oaken, at this point in time, what do you think you would need to do the restoration and upgrade to the Brynn barrier?"

"Time. I'd like to go through the spells that Corabeth and G are intending to use to be sure that they're all stable and have the capacity to be enduring."

"But other than the time to develop your strategy and spells, do you believe that you have all else that you will need?"

"Yes. I'm certain of it. The barrier is in good shape to begin with. We'll just be adding a few touches here and there to augment what's already there. The only thing I might be worried about would be having enough magical energy to fuel such a big spell. But I think with the Spear of Mikael, that won't be a problem."

"Very good. Mr. Hansen, what do you feel that you're going to need to perform the proposed modifications to the Nevermore barrier?" Professor Everstone asked seriously.

"Luck." Mr. Hansen said with a weary chuckle, then explained, "While I couldn't possibly *create* a pocket of folded space anywhere near as big as the one that we'll be dealing with, I have the knowledge and skill to suspend existing folded space and bring Nevermore fully into our reality. The only problem I foresee is that while I have the knowledge and skills, I *don't* have the raw magical energy."

"I had assumed that you would link to the power of the earth element through Dexter." Professor Everstone said simply.

"I *should* be able to do that, but I'm reluctant to put that much stress on Dex right before Zanner needs to draw on him heavily to work on the barrier. If there's another way, I'd like to have Dex fresh and ready to go when Zanner needs him."

"Before we discuss other considerations, perhaps we should verify that your assumptions are correct." Professor Everstone said seriously, then turned to Dex and asked, "What say you, young Mr. Mulryan?"

"I can do this. Mr. Hansen can take what he needs and if it starts to be too much, I can stop him. It's not *my* magic that they're going to

be drawing, it's the earth's. I'm strong enough to control the flow of magic through the bond." Dex said confidently.

"Yes. From what I have observed, I believe that you are." Professor Everstone said sincerely.

"That being the case, the only other obstacle I can foresee is the blessing of the land within the barrier. If Archdruid Highley is unwilling or unable to bless the land, we have no contingency plan." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

"Actually, unless I am mistaken, Agent Roberts may be the key to overcoming that obstacle." Professor Everstone said simply.

"There's no way that I could do a blessing." Agent Roberts quickly interjected.

"With what you've been able to accomplish thus far, I wouldn't put it past you. But I was actually referring to the satellite phone that you mentioned earlier. If you find that Archdruid Highley is unable or unwilling to confer his blessing, you can call Mr. Darroch and request the necessary personnel to complete your mission."

"Yes. Of course." Agent Roberts agreed.

"As to the Southseid barrier, I have the utmost confidence that we will be able to make the necessary adjustments to protect the Wudewas people for years to come." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"Professor, I just want to be clear on one point." Miss Oaken said into the silence that followed.

"What would that be?"

"Are you expecting the students to perform the upgrades with our supervision or are we supposed to participate?"

"From this point forward I expect each group to act autonomously to complete their assigned task. While I am certain that this has been a learning experience for all involved, the most important

thing from here on out is to complete our mission and protect these vulnerable people to the absolute best of our abilities."

"Thank you Professor. That will allow us a few more options." Miss Oaken said thoughtfully.

"Do you want me to go with the Brynn team or would it be better if I made myself scarce?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"As valuable as I'm sure you would be, we wouldn't want to run the risk of your active curse accidentally interacting with whatever spells are being used. I don't believe there would be any danger if you remained here, in Brynnhollow, but I would advise against you being anywhere near any of the teams while they were casting their spells. Of course, I suppose it goes without saying that there would be the least chance of an interaction if you returned to Waxell until we had completed our tasks."

"The truth is, I should be in the office today anyway." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

"I know that you'd rather be in the thick of things, but speaking strictly for myself, it'll be good to know that you'll be a phone call away if we run into something unexpected and need some FBI intervention." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Don't worry Shawn. I've got your back." Agent Fastbeck assured him.

"It sounds like we're going to be leaving right away to work on the barriers. Where are we supposed to meet when we've finished?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"While I suppose that we could *theoretically* complete our work on all three barriers in one evening, more realistically, it's probably going to take a matter of days. That being the case, as we make our plans, we should all include break points in the process where we can stop and rest, then return to tackle the next part of our projects." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"Considering the scale of what we're going to attempt, I think that's probably a good idea." Miss Oaken interjected.

"So, when we've decided that we need a break, where do we meet up?" Mr. Hansen asked again.

"Unless Agent Roberts objects, we could meet at his house." Professor Everstone said simply.

"I don't mind, but I only have the one key..." Agent Roberts began to warn them.

"I don't think that will be a problem for any of us." Filipe said frankly from his side.

"Except for Paul." G chuckled.

Paul shot his brother a dark look, but didn't dispute his words.

"Don't worry Paul, I'll be with you so you won't be left stuck outside." Filipe assured him.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but smile at the playful banter between good friends.

As he smiled, the image of another smile filled his mind's eye and he felt the slightest ache in his heart.

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Once a few more details had been ironed out, Professor Everstone stood and said, "I believe that we've done all that we can collectively. Before we begin our separate undertakings, I want to remind all present not to do *anything* to in any way alter the primary elemental properties of any of the barriers. The magically augmented elements were no doubt established for a very good reason. All we're here to do is update the barriers to make them effective in the modern age."

"Remember, the village elders want to be brought up-to-date on what you intend to do to the Brynn barrier." Agent Fastbeck reminded him.

"If you wouldn't mind, would you go with Miss Oaken's group to talk to the village elders? Since she and the students will be doing the upgrade, they will be able to answer questions most effectively." Professor Everstone said seriously.

"Do you want to wait for us here until we're done talking to the elders? You're going to need me to guide you back to the cars." Agent Fastbeck said cautiously.

"No. I would rather not wait if there's another choice."

"I could try to find someone to guide you. Mason's place is just down the street and he should be able to spare someone for a few hours." Agent Fastbeck said seriously.

Since it seemed that they had something vaguely resembling a plan, everyone got up from the table and seemed to be hovering, waiting for Professor Everstone to lead the way.

* * * * *

When the group began to funnel out of the tavern onto the wood-plank sidewalk, they were immediately approached by three people.

Agent Roberts recognized one of them as being Cain and assumed that the nearly identical boy at his side was his twin brother, Deimos.

"Ares! How are you doing? It's good to see you." Agent Fastbeck said as he shook the man's hand firmly.

"It's nice to see you too, Conrad." The man responded, then continued, "We received your message that Paul and G were going to be visiting today, so I brought the boys into town."

"Everyone, this is Ares Brynner and his sons, Cain and Deimos." Agent Fastbeck said with a smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Brynner. I'm afraid that we have some rather urgent business to attend to at the moment, but

hopefully we will have a chance to stop and chat later." Professor Everstone said firmly, leaving no doubt that he wouldn't allow them to be diverted from their task.

"The professor's right, we need to be going right now, but if you have the time, maybe you could help us out with something." Agent Fastbeck asked hopefully.

Agent Roberts was curious as to what Agent Fastbeck might have in mind.

"Sure. I kind of dropped everything when we heard that G and Paul were going to be here. What can we do to help?"

"Like the professor said, we've got some urgent business to take care of. If you wouldn't mind it, I was hoping that maybe you could lead a group of people back to the cars while the rest of us talk to Carn and the elders." Agent Fastbeck said hopefully.

"Yes. Of course. I'd be happy to help you." Ares said pleasantly.

"Thank you Ares. The rest of us will be along as soon as we're done with our talk." Agent Fastbeck assured him.

"What's going on?" Ares asked curiously.

"Too much to tell right now. As soon as we've got everything settled, I'll tell you as much as I'm able." Agent Fastbeck promised.

"Which I'm guessing won't be much." Ares chuckled, then continued, "If this is urgent, then we should be going."

"G. If this gets to be too much for you, give it to Miss Oaken for a bit." Professor Everstone said as he handed The Spear of Mikael to G.

"I think I can handle it." G assured him earnestly.

"Dad, can I stay here with G?" Cain asked Ares hopefully.

"Sure. Stay with his group and I'll meet you at the parking lot when you get there." Ares said with a smile.

Agent Roberts noticed that Deimos and Paul were holding their own hushed conversation and had no doubt that Cain's twin would be accompanying them on their journey.

Ares gave his son a quick hug around the shoulders, then looked to the group and said, "If everyone's ready, let's go."

* * * * *

Paul and Deimos quietly talked nonstop as the group left the town and headed back the way they arrived, with Ares leading the way.

Agent Roberts noticed that he had Dex and Filipe on either side of him as he walked.

"How are you guys doing?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"I'm a little bit scared. I know that Paul is going to be doing the biggest part of the spell, but I don't know how I'll handle that much magic all at once." Filipe said honestly.

"You'll have Professor Everstone there to watch over things. He's been watching everything that everyone has been doing so far. If he tells you that you can do it, then listen to him and trust what he says." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Yeah. I believe that, but I'm still scared."

"Being scared causes you to be careful and sure of what you're doing. That's not a bad thing. Be scared. Just don't let it stop you from doing what needs to be done."

"Yeah. I'll remember that." Filipe assured him.

"How about you, Dex? How are you doing?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I think I'm okay. With everything we've done so far, I've gotten used to tapping into the earth and controlling the flow of magic. Even though it might get scary when we use a lot of magic at once, I'm not scared of getting hurt; only of messing something up and making the spells go wrong."

"Don't worry. You've got this. I'll be right there with you if you need anything." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Thanks. That makes me feel better."

* * * * *

After walking a while in comfortable silence, Dex quietly asked, "Agent Roberts?"

"Yes?"

"Ever since you lost your shadow I've noticed that you've been distracted. Not all the time, but now and then I see it in your eyes that something's on your mind."

"I suppose that's true."

"Is it something bad? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"It's nothing to worry about. In fact, losing my shadow for a while might end up being a good thing."

"So it's not hurting you?"

"No. It's made me realize that I've been putting off developing meaningful relationships with people. It's made me face the fact that I've never risked my heart."

"Are you talking about falling in love?"

"Yes. Well, maybe. Eventually. Love doesn't spring fully formed from nothing. First you have to take a chance and let someone get close to you. If that works out, then many steps later love may eventually follow."

"Is there someone that you're in love with?"

"No. Not yet." Agent Roberts admitted, then slowly added, "But there's someone I like and I'm attracted to. I think that if we had the chance to spend some time together and get to know each other that maybe it could end up being something more."

"But your shadow was keeping you from talking about how you feel?" Dex asked uncertainly.

"Up to now I always ignored it when I was attracted to someone. I just hid the feelings away so that I could focus on more important things. But when Milo stole my shadow, he took away my hiding place and I had to *feel* my feelings."

"What's going to happen when you get your shadow back?"

"I hope that I'll have the courage to face my feelings and do something about them." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"Be scared. Just don't let it stop you from doing what needs to be done." Filipe said from Agent Roberts' other side.

"It's no fair using my own words against me." Agent Roberts said to him with a grin.

"Are you going to have the guts to at least take a chance?" Filipe asked challengingly.

"I guess I don't have much of a choice in the matter, that is, if I want to be able to look you in the eyes next time we meet."

"Okay." Filipe said seriously, then added a little more quietly, "We just want for you to have a shot at being happy."

"I want that for you too, both of you. Don't make *my* mistake and think that your school or your job is more important than your own life. Find a balance. Too much of any one thing will lead you to an unhappy place."

That having been said, Agent Roberts continued to walk with the boys at his sides. He had a slight smile on his face as he remembered a beautiful smile, made even more beautiful for the fact that it was just for him.

* * * * *

Upon reaching the parking lot, Ares said, "This is as far as I go."

"Are you going to be alright here on your own?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"We'll be fine. If we get too bored either Deimos or I can change and fly back into town to see what's keeping them." Ares said simply.

Upon hearing his name, Deimos ran up to his father and excitedly asked, "Can I show Paul? No one here will care if I change in front of them."

Ares glanced around the group to assess the mood, then said, "Okay. But don't take too long. They need to be leaving."

Upon receiving his father's approval, Deimos quickly called out, "Paul! Look!"

Agent Roberts was interested to see what had the young teenage boy so excited.

Deimos began performing the gestures that Agent Roberts had come to associate with spellcasting.

"Be careful! You're going to blow yourself up!" Paul said in sudden panic.

"Just watch!" Deimos called in return as he continued unabated.

Agent Roberts glanced at Paul and could see the genuine concern for his younger friend.

As Agent Roberts turned his attention back to Deimos, he was surprised to see a sudden burst of fire erupt, completely engulfing the boy.

Although Agent Roberts wanted to react, he was at a loss for what to do. None of his military or FBI training had prepared him for what to do when someone spontaneously combusted right in front of him.

Before he could formulate a course of action, a large scaled reptile emerged from the flames, spreading its wings wide.

There was a long moment of silence that followed, then Paul reluctantly said, "Okay Deimos, you got me. *That* was impressive."

Agent Roberts couldn't help but agree.

The monster before him, which could only be defined as a 'dragon', began to shrink at the same time as the fire extinguished itself.

Within a minute, Deimos was standing before them looking perfectly normal.

"How did you do that with the fire and not burn yourself up or burn up your clothes?" Paul asked curiously.

"I just did the clothes changing spell before I did the fire spell. Right before I let the fire spell loose, I let go of my transformation."

"I guess there's an advantage to having a transformation ability that's always primed and ready to go off." Paul said frankly.

"Jim and Cain have both been able to do the clothes changing spell you showed us. Tannis can't do it yet, but I think that if he keeps trying that he's going to be able to before too long."

"It seems that despite being told that they don't have access to their witchcraft, the boys have decided to ignore that and practice the spells they want to use anyway." Ares said frankly.

"I got my fire from Agent Fastbeck's curse on me. That was my one big wish. But I don't know if the clothes spell counted as part of my wish or if you can get past the curse if you work hard enough and keep at it." Deimos said honestly.

"I can't speak for the entire history of Brynnhollow, but from what I've personally witnessed, not too many people have *really* tried to overcome the limitation of their magical powers. The witches on the mountain are the only ones I'm aware of; they have been able to make at least *some*of their magic work." Ares said thoughtfully.

"What are the chances that the curse wasn't to limit your magic but instead, your interest in learning magic?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"There *is* a magical limit, without a doubt. As far as the rest... who knows? Maybe there is some sort of compulsion that stifles the desire to learn the craft." Ares conceded.

"Perhaps we can ponder such mysteries once our work with the barriers has been completed." Professor Everstone suggested.

"Go ahead. We'll wait here for Cain to arrive." Ares assured them.

"Be scared, but do it anyway." Filipe said to Agent Roberts seriously.

"You too." Agent Roberts responded with a smile, then gave Filipe a quick firm hug before releasing him.

Agent Roberts watched as Professor Everstone, Paul and Filipe walked to Professor Everstone's rental car and Mr. Bentley Brown walked to his own car.

"Are you ready?" Mr. Hansen asked as he approached with Zanner at his side.

"I'm not sure exactly what you expect me to do, but whatever it is, I'm ready to do it." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Then let's do it. Boys, you'll be riding with me so that we can finalize our plans." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

Dex turned to Agent Roberts and looked him in the eyes before saying, "Be scared."

Agent Roberts smiled at the words and responded, "Do it anyway."

With that being said, Dex walked with Zanner and Mr. Hansen to Mr. Hansen's rental car.

Agent Roberts walked to his own car as he seriously contemplated just what part he was supposed to play in the upcoming events.

Book 3.2: Nevermore

Chapter 29

It took a few minutes of driving for Agent Roberts to realize that nothing was weighing heavily on his mind. He had taken all the steps that he conceivably could to ensure the wellbeing of his teammates and he had been able to make peace with his own internal struggle.

For as tightly wound as he usually tended to be, at that moment in time he felt like he was on the right path, doing what needed to be done.

While the sensation was freeing, it was also a bit worrying, in that not being coiled with tension allowed him to focus on his personal life.

Perhaps it was more accurate to say his 'lack' of a personal life.

His days were filled with work. His nights at home... were filled with work. His days off... were filled with work. Keeping the tension ramped up to twelve at all times kept him from noticing that he had nothing resembling a personal life. His first name might as well be 'Agent', because he defined himself entirely by his job title.

Although the thought was somewhat grim, it was just a thought. As it passed, he focused on the job ahead of him and what other preparations he might be able to make, in case Archdruid Highley, Milo or Jen decided to pull another one of their stunts.

* * * * *

Passing through the wrought iron gates brought fresh determination upon Agent Roberts.

He wanted his shadow back.

Even though having it taken away had ended up being a learning experience, that didn't keep him from feeling the lack of it.

The shadow was *his* and he felt its absence.

While he wasn't filled with rage toward Milo, he was determined.

A glance in his mirror confirmed that Mr. Hansen and the boys were still following.

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts slowly entered the abandoned town, it turned out to be quite a bit less abandoned than it was on their last visit.

At least there were several cars present, lining the streets. There weren't any people in evidence and the buildings looked no less rundown and abandoned than they had the night before.

After passing through the town, Agent Roberts could see a number of cars in the distance, parked in front of the church. His mind raced over the possibilities as he continued on toward his destination.

* * * * *

"What's going on here?" Mr. Hansen asked as he approached Agent Roberts' car.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I thought we were supposed to keep the barrier a secret. Why would Archdruid Highley have people here?" Zanner asked anxiously.

"I suppose we'll just have to ask him." Agent Roberts said simply.

"So do you think that we should proceed as planned?" Mr. Hansen asked nervously.

"For now. Yes. But don't be afraid to call a stop to it the moment you believe that anyone is in danger. We're here to restore and renovate the barrier, but if Archdruid Highley starts jerking us around, all bets are off. He and his 'protectorate' can go straight to hell."

"Actually, given the properties of folded space and the proximity of the primary hell dimensions, I'm pretty sure that I could *literally* do that." Mr. Hansen reluctantly stated.

"Let's consider that 'Plan B'."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts, Mr. Hansen, Zanner and Dex walked as a tight group through the enormous doors of the church.

The pews were filled to capacity, this time with living people. Everyone was silent as they looked to the back of the church, where Agent Roberts and his group were entering.

It took a moment for Agent Roberts' eyes to adjust to the dimmer light inside, but he was finally able to spot Archdruid Highley dressed in ornate robes. He was on a dais at the front of the room.

There were two men on either side of him dressed in robes that were slightly less ornate. Off to the left, Milo and Jen were wearing plain robes.

"Zanner and Dex, please come forward so that I can introduce you to the family." Archdruid Highley said with a grand smile.

Right that moment, Agent Roberts had the overwhelming urge to punch Archdruid Highley in the head. He was reasonably sure that he could even play it off as being Milo's fault for having stolen his shadow. But the most important thing in that moment was to protect Zanner and Dex. It would be considerably harder to do that if he were embroiled in a pointless fight.

As the group approached the dais, Archdruid Highley said, "Today will be the culmination of years of devotion. The faithful will finally be rewarded."

Agent Roberts suddenly understood what Archdruid Highley was doing.

He was turning their humanitarian effort to help the Nephilim into a spectacle to confirm his hold over his religious followers. Zanner and Dex were going to be used as his sideshow freaks to put on a show for the congregation.

"What should we do?" Mr. Hansen asked nervously.

Agent Roberts stopped and made sure that the boys were also paying attention before saying, "The only way we're going to get through this is if everyone's in agreement. If anyone wants to back out, we won't hold it against you. But if you agree to continue, we're going to be counting on you to stick with it until the end."

"I don't understand what you're planning." Mr. Hanson said honestly.

"I'm planning on us doing *exactly* what we came here to do. Archdruid Highley can take responsibility and deal with the fallout of his decisions. I don't plan on doing *anything* because of or in spite of his plans."

"There has to be something more to it. What are you not saying?"

"This isn't the time and place to discuss it." Agent Roberts said as he glanced around at dozens of people silently watching them.

"Boys! Come on up here! Everyone is here to witness your miraculous feat." Archdruid Highley said joyously.

Zanner turned to Agent Roberts and quietly asked, "You're going to make him pay for this, aren't you?"

"I intend to say only the truth and do only what I've promised. I suggest that you do the same." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"You believe that he will be hoist by his own petard?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

Agent Roberts gave a slight, single nod in his direction.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Zanner demanded to know.

"Ask me about it later and I'll explain it to you. For now, you've got a decision to make. Do you want to go through with this or do you want to leave? I'll support your decision either way." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"I don't care about what I promised. But I *do* care about the nephilim. They don't deserve to be hurt because of all this. I'll do it for them." Zanner said reluctantly.

"Dex?"

"Zanner needs me. If he's willing to do it, so am I." Dex said simply.

"Dag? Are you in or out?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked Mr. Hansen in the eyes.

"I believe that the boys are choosing to do the right thing and for the right reason. I will be honored to support them however I can."

"Okay. Then let's get this over with." Agent Roberts said, then motioned ahead of them.

Zanner and Dex walked forward and stopped just short of the dais.

"Come on up here boys! Let everyone get a good look at you!" Archdruid Highley said loudly enough to be heard through the entire sanctuary.

"Do you still want us to save 'the protectorate'?" Zanner asked simply.

"Yes. Of course. That's why you're here. That's what I called everyone in to see."

"We're here to do a job, not put on a show. Either we can start right now, or we'll leave." Zanner said firmly.

Agent Roberts was surprised by the demanding tone that Zanner used, but was also incredibly proud of the position he had chosen to take a stand upon.

"If that's the way that it has to be, then I suppose that we can begin the procession to the protectorate." Archdruid Highley reluctantly conceded.

"Before we do that, I think Milo has something that belongs to Agent Roberts. Give it back." Zanner said firmly.

"There'll be time enough for that once we arrive at the protectorate..."

"Let's go." Zanner said as he turned to face Agent Roberts and Mr. Hansen.

"Whatever you say." Agent Roberts said, feeling incredibly proud of Zanner in that moment.

"No! Wait!" Archdruid Highley called in panic.

Zanner slowly turned, then said, "Give. It. Back."

"Milo. Do it." Archdruid Highley snapped sharply.

"I'll be glad to be rid of it." Milo said as he stepped off the dais and walked to stand before Agent Roberts.

"What? You didn't enjoy my repressed emotions?" Agent Roberts asked with a knowing grin.

"Agent Roberts, please take this in the spirit that it's intended. You *seriously* need to get laid." Milo said frankly, then began performing the descriptive hand gestures associated with spellcasting.

"If that's all you got from my shadow, then you don't deserve to have it. You don't have the depth to understand." Agent Roberts grinned.

"Listen. When I took your shadow, I never expected it to be as... tenacious... as it was. I might have broken it a little bit." Milo said quietly.

"You broke my shadow?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"It should still work okay, but it might not be *exactly* the same as it was before." Milo explained, then hurriedly added, "I didn't mean to. I really wasn't trying to hurt it."

"Are you done? Is it back?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"Yes. Your shadow is back with you, every last shard of it has been reattached." Milo said emphatically, then added a muttered, "Good riddance."

"I'm sure it feels the same toward you." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Are you okay?" Dex asked with concern.

"Yeah. I'm fine." Agent Roberts assured him.

"Good. Then let's go and get this done." Zanner said firmly, then started walking toward the side entrance that led to the parsonage.

Dex immediately followed him. Agent Roberts and Mr. Hansen took an extra moment to assess their surroundings, but soon caught up to the boys.

"Since when is Zanner in charge?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously as they walked.

"Since he *took* charge. Don't worry about it. It looks good on him. He wears it well." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"How long should we allow him to dictate what we're doing?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"Until he needs our help. And when that time comes, I suggest that we offer our help respectfully and in a manner that he can accept it without losing face." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"I feel like I'm missing something. Is there something more going on here than what it appears on the surface?" Mr. Hansen asked as they stepped out the side door into sparkling sunlight.

"Archdruid Highley looks upon Zanner and Dex as being the saviors of the protectorate. We're not even an afterthought in his grand scheme. Zanner taking charge of the situation actually carries some weight with him. I think it's best if we play along."

"When you put it that way, I can see how that might be to our benefit." Mr. Hansen said thoughtfully.

"I think it'll be good for Zanner, too. Just gaining the knowledge that he has the ability to take charge when the situation warrants can be a huge developmental hurdle to overcome. This might well end up being a formative event that will shape the person that he will develop into." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I see what you're saying and I agree."

Agent Roberts looked back over his shoulder and saw that, as expected, a long procession of people were following them out past the parsonage and on toward the lip of the basin.

"I thought Archdruid Highley was committed to keeping the protectorate a secret. What do you think caused him to change his mind so drastically?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"I don't know. Maybe he believes that his followers will become more devoted, and therefore be more able to keep the secret, once they witness something miraculous." Agent Roberts ventured.

"It seems like an unacceptable risk for him to take with the safety and continued existence of the Nephilim." Mr. Hansen said thoughtfully.

"Then again, I suppose that it could be Jen. Filipe said from the beginning that she didn't use illusions, but mind control. That being the case, it's *possible* that she did something to make him believe that this is a reasonable course of action."

"If that turns out to be the case, what should we do?" Mr. Hansen asked slowly.

"I intend to say only the truth and do only what I've promised. I won't share my speculations with Archdruid Highley, but if I happen upon some *facts* that he should be made aware of, I'll pass them along."

"I don't get how you can be so calm about this." Dex said as their group slowed and became more condensed while carefully walking down the steep path into the basin.

"What's my other choice? Freak out? Throw a fit? How likely is that to change anything? We have to deal with what's in front of us." Agent Roberts said frankly as he was careful to watch his footing.

"But we don't have to like it." Dex said thoughtfully from ahead of them.

"No. We'll do what we have to do to protect the Nephilim. The rest can sort itself out."

"Mr. Darroch is going to be upset that we didn't keep it a secret." Mr. Hansen said from directly behind him.

"Tell me, what more could we have done?" Agent Roberts asked simply, then continued, "Did anyone of us make a single mistake that brought about this outcome?"

"No. This state of affairs was not of our making." Mr. Hansen confirmed.

"Then we just have to make the best of a bad situation."

* * * * *

Once they were on level ground, Dex was the one to lead the way, off to their left, to a totally different location than the one they had used to examine the barrier.

Agent Roberts noticed that Archdruid Highley and his 'congregation' were automatically following as soon as they left the path.

"It's there." Dex said as he pointed to the rockface that formed the bowl of the basin that they were in.

"What's there?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"The ritual site where the folded space was anchored. Unless you're in the mood for some bloody mayhem, it would be best if we gathered everyone by the wall so that they will be out of the way when the space is unfolded." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

"I'll handle that." Agent Roberts assured him, then turned to join Archdruid Highley who was approaching with his robed companions following in his wake.

"You need to get everyone over by that wall, they should be safe over there." Agent Roberts said, none too pleasantly.

"So you're still going to do it?" Archdruid Highley asked hopefully.

"We'll do what we said that we'd do. But don't expect any of us to go out of our way for you. We trusted you and you betrayed us." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"These few remaining followers that we have left deserve to be rewarded and validated for their continued faith. If all goes as you plan, then this will be the one and only time that they will ever have the opportunity to actually 'see' that what I've been telling them is true." Archdruid Highley implored him to understand.

"And you thought *that* was more important than protecting the Nephilim?" Agent Roberts asked rhetorically, then continued, "We'll do what we said that we'd do, but that's it. Once we've finished, we're going to leave and you'll have to deal with the fallout of what you've done today."

"These people deserve to know that what they've believed for generations is true."

"And what do the Nephilim deserve?"

Before Archdruid Highley could answer, Agent Roberts turned and started walking toward where Dex and the others had gone.

* * * * *

"Did you ask him about doing the blessing?" Zanner asked as Agent Roberts approached.

"No. The subject didn't come up." Agent Roberts quietly admitted.

"We can give him some magic to work his spell, but I don't know if he'll need any incense or relics or anything like that to make it work. I've never studied anything about cleric spells."

"Zanner is correct. Archdruid Highley may need time to gather necessary items to perform his ritual. It would be best to give him the time that he will need. Otherwise we might be forced to wait unnecessarily." Mr. Hansen stated seriously.

"Yeah. I'll tell him. If it'll get this over with any sooner, I'm in favor of it."

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts approached, he noticed that Archdruid Highley was speaking with the other robed figures that had been accompanying him on the dais.

"I forgot to tell you before that we're going to need your help." Agent Roberts interrupted.

"Do you need for me to open the protectorate for you?"

"No. But we were thinking that you could enact some kind of ritual blessing to make the entire protectorate 'Holy Ground'. That way if someone found a way to get in from the outside, it would be in place to stop them from causing any magical mischief."

"I don't think that I'm able to invoke a blessing on such a large area. And, to be honest, my blessings don't actually seem to do much more than make people feel a bit more at ease."

"With all of us helping you, we should be able to bless the entire protectorate." One of the robed men said from Archdruid Highley's side.

"Agent Roberts, this is one of my brothers, Emilio." Archdruid Highley said distractedly.

"Mr. Hansen has said that we can divert a little of the natural magic that we'll be using to fuel your blessing."

"That could *actually* work." Another of the men said with a hopeful smile.

"That's my brother, Den." Archdruid Highley said quickly.

Agent Roberts looked at Archdruid Highley, then at Den appraisingly. Finally, he couldn't help but ask, "are you speaking of a 'brother in the faith' or in a biological sense?"

"Both. Technically, Den is my half-brother, in fact, all my brothers are half-brothers. We all have different mothers."

"Dad's kind of a slut." Emilio said with a grin.

"He employs a somewhat relaxed moral code." Archdruid Highley said diplomatically.

"So, can you guys do the blessing or not?" Agent Roberts asked shortly.

"Yes. We would be honored to participate." Archdruid Highley responded.

"Then you'd better get what you need because Zanner and Dex will be ready to start soon." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Milo! Jen! I need your help!" Archdruid Highley said loudly as he hurried away.

"He knows better than to try and command the rest of us like that, because we'd just tell him to stuff it." Emilio said with a grin.

"So you and your brothers aren't 'true believers'?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"We *believe*. We've been in the presence of angels, so we know it's real. But we don't buy into the whole 'praise and worship' cult thing. It actually makes me kind of sick to my stomach to see people behaving like this."

"Then why does Archdruid Highley keep it going?"

"Call him Jarvis." Emilio said flatly, then explained, "We needed someone here to watch over the protectorate. When Dad decided to move on to other things, he had to name someone to be his successor."

"And he chose Jarvis?"

"Dad said that the rest of us were smart and talented enough to go out into the world and be whatever we wanted to be. Jarvis... well, you've met him. This is about all that he's fit to do. The rest of us do our best to keep tabs on him and keep him from doing anything too terrible."

"What do you think about what he's done here? I mean, by calling all these people in, he's endangering the protectorate, isn't he?"

"Yes. And if I could have stopped him, I would have. But for right now, we'll just have to do our best to keep this from spinning too far out of control. If we can, I'd like to make this as quick and painless as possible, then work together to pick up the pieces."

"I'm afraid that's really the best we can hope for in all of this, isn't it?" Agent Roberts asked regretfully.

"I can't think of a better option."

"Thanks Emilio, you've helped me put a few things into perspective."

"Just remember that if Jarvis doesn't get his way, he's going to throw a tantrum. I'm not saying that you should always let him

have his way, just be aware that if you cross him he'll turn into a spoiled brat about it." Den interjected.

"Got it. Thanks guys. I appreciate you setting me straight about Jarvis. I haven't known him long enough to know how he really is."

"He's a wanker." Emilio said simply.

"But he's also our brother." Den added, apparently none too thrilled with the declaration.

"Right." Emilio agreed, then added, "We don't have to like him, but we're duty bound to love him."

"I think I understand. Let me know if you have any ideas about how to salvage this mess."

"Yeah. You too." Emilio said as he looked around the gathering, obviously not pleased by what he was seeing.

* * * * *

"Is Archdruid Highley going to do the blessing?" Zanner asked as Agent Roberts approached.

"Yes. He and his brothers are going to work together and believe that they will be able to bless the entire protectorate. Jarvis has gone to gather the supplies that they will be needing." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"I suppose that we should wait on them to return before I start unfolding space. If we do this wrong, some people could get crushed when the pocket dimension comes into being on top of them." Mr. Hansen explained.

"Are you sure that you can do this? I mean, it seems awfully big for just one person." Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"If it were a matter of 'creating' the space, it would be well beyond my capabilities. But what I'm going to be doing is akin to turning off a light switch. I'm going to access and suspend the dimensional

spell that already exists. With Dex's help, I should be able to do that."

"And when we're done, you'll just flip the switch back on?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"Yes. Exactly. I'll access the existing spell and reinstate it to be as it was when we found it."

Agent Roberts looked off in the direction that Jarvis, Milo and Jen had gone, but didn't see any sign of any of them.

"If you don't need me right now, I think I'd like to do a little snooping around." Agent Roberts said quietly.

"Zanner and I will need a few minutes to verify our connections to the earth through Dex. I can't think of anything for you to do while we're doing that." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"Thanks. I'll come back over here when Jarvis and the trouble twins get back with their blessing supplies." Agent Roberts assured him.

"You seem to be quite a bit more relaxed since your shadow's been restored." Mr. Hansen observed.

"I guess so. It's nice to have it back."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts noticed that all four of Jarvis' brothers were gathered together and seemed to be plotting something.

"We can't do much of anything until Jarvis and his minions return." Agent Roberts said as he approached.

"Same here. We were just discussing possibilities." Den said frankly.

"Have you come up with anything?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"Cyrus wants to get all the 'congregants' inside the protectorate then fold it away." Emilio said frankly.

"That would solve the problem about keeping the protectorate a secret." One of the men, presumably 'Cyrus', explained.

"Yes. But then we'd have to deal with explaining their disappearances." Den said reasonably.

"I know. But it would solve so many problems..."

"By creating *other* problems." The last of the brothers said firmly.

"Agent Roberts, I don't think you've met Cyrus and Jud. Guys, this is Agent Roberts." Emilio said pleasantly.

"Shawn. Please don't make it weird by calling me by my title." Agent Roberts responded.

"It's nice to meet you Shawn. I only wish it wasn't because our little brother was being such a jackass. He doesn't need to do anything more to tarnish the family name." Jud said frankly.

Den laughed, then said, "You're the only one who has to worry about that. The rest of us were lucky enough to get our mothers' last names."

"It still reflects badly on all of us." Jud said in his defense.

"So all of you have different last names?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Yeah. Dad totally ran this place like a cult. He could *have* any woman he wanted... and he did. I guess if there's anything good to be said about him it's that he never denied his kids. He always acknowledged us as being his and he was a *real* father to us." Emilio said frankly.

"Yeah. In fact, I think the reason he stuck around here for as long as he did was for us. He made sure that we were going to be alright before he moved on." Den said with a nod.

"Where's your father now?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"He's gone to be with the Angels." Cyrus said, sounding a bit regretful.

"You make it sound like he's dead!" Den laughed, then explained, "He left with the Angels to help them. They're limited in what they can do on our plane of existence, and rather than training new clerics everywhere they go, they decided to take Dad with them."

"We've probably got a dozen more brothers and sisters by now." Emilio said with a grin.

"At least." Den said with a smirk at his brother.

"There's Jarvis. I guess we'd better get serious about doing the blessing. It's been a few years since I've even thought about doing the 'druid' thing." Cyrus said honestly.

"Don't worry, it's just like riding a bike." Emilio assured him.

"Yeah. One wrong move and you'll crash." Den interjected.

"I'd better get back. Let us know when you're ready and we'll start." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"Just give us a few minutes to deal with Jarvis and we should be fine." Emilio assured him.

"Yeah. We'll work collectively to help him get his panties unbunched." Den said with a roll of his eyes.

"I don't know how any brother of *ours* could have turned out to be such a diva." Cyrus said with a nod.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but laugh as he walked away from the brothers and back toward the rock face where Mr. Hansen and the boys were preparing.

* * * * *

After checking in with Mr. Hansen, Agent Roberts kept careful watch on the brothers for any sign that they were ready.

They seemed to be embroiled in a rather intense conversation, but then at a certain point, they must have reached consensus, because rather than talking, they all appeared to be going through the supplies that Jarvis, Milo and Jen had brought them.

As Agent Roberts watched, Den broke away from the group.

Once Den was close enough, Agent Roberts said, "Guys, this is Den. He's one of Archdruid Highley's brothers.

"Den Markura." He said as he shook hands all around.

"Den, I'd like for you to meet Dag, Zanner and Dex. They're going to be upgrading the barrier of the protectorate." Agent Roberts said formally.

"It's an honor to meet all of you. Thank you for helping us. I'm sorry about our brother making things difficult for you. I have no excuse. Just know that my brothers and I will do everything in our power to make things go as smoothly as possible." Den said respectfully.

"Are you guys ready to do your ritual?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Yes. We've set Jen and Milo to keeping everyone out of your way. The rest of us are primed and ready for action." Den assured them.

"What about you guys? How much do we have left to prepare?" Agent Roberts asked his companions.

"I think we're as ready as we're going to get." Zanner responded.

"Good. Then let's get this over with." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"Good luck guys. We're all counting on you." Den said before walking back toward his brothers.

"You heard the man. Let's do this right." Agent Roberts said to his companions.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts looked back toward 'the congregation' and was pleased to find that Jen and Milo seemed to be doing a decent job of keeping the three dozen or so people contained.

As he turned back to his group, he thought to ask, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Please just do your best to see that I'm not interrupted. This is a very delicate process." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

"Don't worry. I've got you covered." Agent Roberts assured him.

"Dex? Are you ready?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Go ahead." Dex said confidently.

Agent Roberts watched as Mr. Hansen rapidly muttered an incantation while performing an insanely complicated series of gestures at lightning speed.

"Bring forth the seven spires of earth." Mr. Hansen finally called into the air as he went down on one knee and slapped one hand flat on the ground.

First there was silence, as everyone in attendance waited to see what was going to happen.

Next, there was a rumbling from deep within the earth. The sensation was unfamiliar and disturbing on some primal level.

Finally, a stone pillar began to rise up from within the ground. Unlike when Paul had 'created' stone, the pillar emerged, pushing the thick grass and moist earth out of it's way.

When the pillar slowed its growth toward the sky, Agent Roberts scanned the area to see if he could spot any more of them.

There weren't any within his field of vision, but he reasoned that the area must be so vast that it wasn't possible to see one pillar from the next.

When the rumbling of the ground finally completely stopped, Mr. Hansen turned to Zanner and gave a single nod.

Agent Roberts followed his gaze and saw Zanner beginning to cast a spell.

Although he couldn't hear the words, he noticed that Zanner seemed to have his attention focused on the five brothers.

When Agent Roberts looked at the brothers, he could see a faint golden aura starting to surround them.

Mr. Hansen's voice drew his attention and Agent Roberts turned to see what he was going to do next.

Although Mr. Hansen was speaking loudly, Agent Roberts didn't understand whatever language he was using.

* * * * *

After a few minutes, Agent Roberts noticed that the gentle breeze had turned into a gale force wind.

He had to fight to keep his footing as the wind kept increasing. He glanced to see that Dex and Zanner were alright and found them holding their own.

When Mr. Hansen's passionate spellcasting reached a crescendo, there was a moment that seemed to be broken out of time. For just an instant, there was absolute silence and stillness. Just as suddenly as the silence had begun, it ended. The rush of wind nearly knocked Agent Roberts off his feet and he had to fight to find his balance. In the next moment, he came to the sudden realization that all the air had been sucked out of his lungs.

Just as suddenly as the sensation had come upon him, it passed and Agent Roberts was able to breathe again.

As he took in a deep inhale, he looked around to assess the conditions of the others.

Mr. Hansen looked a little worse for wear, like he had been drained.

Zanner and Dex looked a bit better than that, but they had obviously been impacted.

Archdruid Highley and his brothers were gathering themselves, but were still glowing with borrowed power.

'The Congregation' seemed to be nothing less than amazed by what they had just witnessed.

In a bellowing voice, Mr. Hansen then called out, "Preserving the integrity of this precious realm, peel away the veil. Reveal this forbidden land unto the world."

Chapter 30

"You brought down the protectorate! It's just like in my vision!" Archdruid Highley bellowed.

Agent Roberts was still marvelling at the 'alien' landscape that had just appeared before them. Although he had seen it before, then it had been almost like a dream. Now he was confronted with it right in front of him, in the *real* world.

"I brought you here to fix the protectorate, not to destroy it!" Archdruid Highley ranted.

"I'll take care of this. You guys get started on the barrier upgrades." Agent Roberts told Mr. Hansen and the boys.

"Let the druids know that they can begin their blessing at any time." Mr. Hansen said quietly as he fought to catch his breath.

"I'll tell them." Agent Roberts assured him before walking away.

* * * * *

"You were supposed to save them!" Archdruid Highley screamed as he saw Agent Roberts approaching.

"Do you guys really *need* him to do the blessing? Because if you don't, I think I could probably knock him out with one punch. I bet it would make things a whole lot easier for all of us." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"As much fun as it might be, he *is* the Archdruid. He's devoted his life... blah, blah, blah... he deserves to be a part of this." Emilio said with an unenthusiastic roll of his eyes.

"Do you think you can calm him down so that we can speak reasonably?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"Getting Jarvis to calm down and speak reasonably is a challenge on a good day, but we can *try*." Emilio assured him.

"You DESTROYED the protectorate! You were supposed to save it!" Archdruid Highley ranted.

"We didn't destroy it! We just shut it down for maintenance! We'll turn it back on as soon as we're finished!" Agent Roberts barked, taken back to his military training for just a moment.

"So everything's going to plan?" Den asked cautiously, obviously uncertain of Agent Roberts' willingness to entertain further questions.

Agent Roberts looked at him and his hard expression eased as he said, "Yes. They're working on the barrier improvements right now. All that's left to be started is the blessing."

"Jarvis. Snap out of it. If you can't pull yourself together, we'll put Jud in charge and he's going to lead the blessing." Emilio said firmly.

"No! Don't do that! I'll do it!" Archdruid Highley said suddenly, then quickly added, "I need to tell Milo and Jen what we'll be doing. Just a second. I'll be right back."

Agent Roberts, Emilio and Den watched as he hurried away.

"He's always been especially competitive with Jud." Emilio said as an aside.

"He's a spoiled little five-year-old brat who always wants to be the center of attention." Den grumbled.

"That's a bit harsh." Emilio said disapprovingly.

"Yeah. You need to apologise to five year olds." Agent Roberts said with a grin.

"That settles it Shawn. We're going to make you an honorary brother." Den laughed.

"You've got my vote." Emilio said simply.

* * * * *

"We won't be able to do the blessing from the outside. Once I open the protectorate, each of us will need to go to the major holy sites of the land to pronounce our blessings." Archdruid Highley said as he rushed back to his brothers.

"We know what to do. Just open it and tell us where we're going." Den said seriously.

"Why don't you go to the crystal grotto? Emilio can go to the eternal well, Jud can go to the steps of ascension, Cyrus can go to the King's Sanctuary and I'll go to the shrine of light." Archdruid Highley said authoritatively.

"Nope. You get the King's Sanctuary." Cyrus said immediately, then explained, "You're the keeper. You need to be the one to deal with the *royals*."

"I just thought it would be better for you since you don't like heights." Archdruid Highley explained.

"I like the royals even less." Cyrus said frankly.

"How about this..." Emilio interrupted. "Cyrus, you take the well, I'll get the shrine and Jarvis can get the royals. Does that work for everyone?"

When no one objected, Emilio turned to Jarvis and said, "Open it up so we can get this done."

Archdruid Highley hurried toward the protectorate as Agent Roberts asked, "Isn't it already open?"

"Try to enter it." Emilio said simply.

"Can you just tell me what's going on?"

"Even though the protectorate is here in our space, it still has a boundary that we can't cross. Jarvis has to let us in."

"Is he the only one who can?"

"Dad can open it. I don't know of anyone else alive who has been granted the gift." Den said, then looked to his brothers for confirmation.

"What would you do if something happened to Jarvis? How would you get in?"

"We'd have to call upon the angels and ask them to choose another keeper." Emilio said frankly.

"There he goes." Cyrus said and pointed.

Agent Roberts followed his pointing finger and saw Archdruid Highley going through the ritual to open the barrier.

"He'll be ready in a minute so we need to get ready to go." Emilio said unenthusiastically, then added, "We'll be back as soon as we've blessed this thing."

"Are you sure you're in the right frame of mind to be performing a *blessing*?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"It's just a spell. If you have the power and do the thing, then the thing you want happens. It's all about as *holy* as my left butt cheek, but if you do everything that you're supposed to, the magic works." Emilio explained.

"If that's the case, then what's with the robes and incense and all of that?" Agent Roberts asked with genuine interest.

"Sometimes it makes things easier to if you can visualize what your doing. The rest is to put on a show. Most of the *real* magic that we do isn't that flashy. When you go through the ritual and do all the steps, little if anything actually happens that you can see." Den said frankly.

"You're not going to keep butts in the seats unless you give them a little razzle dazzle." Jud interjected.

"It's open. We've got to go." Emilio said to the group.

"Keep yourself safe, Shawn. If the Nephilim decide that they want to take a peek at the outside world, things could get interesting out here." Jud warned him.

"I will. Thanks guys." Agent Roberts promised, then watched as the four brothers headed toward the archway, where Archdruid Highley was waiting for them.

* * * * *

"I take it that the blessing is underway." Mr. Hansen said as Agent Roberts approached.

"It's going to be a few minutes for them to get into position. I guess that there are sacred sites throughout the protectorate and they need to go to them before they can perform their rituals."

"Yes. That would stand to reason." Mr. Hansen confirmed distractedly.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Zanner's performing an assessment of the obstructive barrier that was just revealed. I think you can help us most by keeping us from being interrupted or distracted while we work. Once we're in the thick of our spellcasting, we're going to need to be able to concentrate so that we can see it through to the end. We're going to try to do this in one go."

"Okay. Just be sure to let me know if there's anything more that I can do."

"If you'll do that much, I believe that everything will be alright."

"That's good to hear."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts looked around to assess the situation and finally decided to see if Milo and Jen needed any help containing Archdruid Highley's enthusiastic followers, who had probably just become 'true believers' in the past few minutes.

"How are things going over here?" Agent Roberts asked as he approached.

"I already gave it back. What more do you want from me?" Milo asked as he backed away.

Although Agent Roberts wanted Milo to take him seriously, it disturbed him to see the man terrified of him.

"I was just checking to see if you and Jen needed any help over here." Agent Roberts said reasonably.

"These are our people. We can take care of them." Milo said, trying to sound assertive, and missing the mark by quite a bit.

"Under normal circumstances I would agree with you. But with all these amazing things going on, I could see someone being overcome with religious fervor. With emotions running this high, someone could overload." Agent Roberts explained.

"If that happened, Jen could just send them to their 'happy place' for a while to calm them down." Milo responded cautiously.

Agent Roberts got the sense that Milo's answer might be a first cautious step toward trust.

"Okay. If you say that you've got this under control, I'll take you at your word."

Milo was surprised by the announcement, but finally said, "Thanks."

"Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help you." Agent Roberts offered, to further demonstrate that, at least in some regard, they were on the same side of things.

Milo nervously glanced downward, then took an awkward step to the right.

Agent Roberts looked down and saw that his shadow was just a little bit darker than it had any right to be and it seemed to be distorted beyond what the environmental factors would dictate.

In short, it appeared as though his shadow was straining to try and reach Milo.

"I don't know anything about shadows. If you'll tell me what's going on, maybe it's something I can help you with." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I think your shadow feels empowered by being back with you. Since I accidentally hurt it, it wants to hurt me in return." Milo said as he shifted again to avoid coming into contact with Agent Roberts' shadow.

"Could it really hurt you?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Yes. You've filled it with so much power that it can overcome the boundaries that usually keep shadows contained." Milo said grimly.

"It's never given me any problem before. Is this just happening now because you separated it from me?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"There's a lot that's not known about the shadows. The only communication we have with them is empathic and that's inaccurate at its best." Milo said frankly.

"But what about *my* shadow? It's never had a problem before. So isn't this entirely your fault for breaking it away from me?"

"Listen, my father is a fairy, I mean literally, not in the derogatory way."

"I know what you mean."

"Good. Thanks for not making a joke of it." Milo said sincerely, then continued, "Even though I was born looking human, I inherited some of my dad's fairy magic. Since I grew up and lived in the human world, my dad didn't have a lot of opportunities to teach me all about everything."

"So you knew what was *supposed* to happen when you took my shadow, but it didn't end up turning out that way." Agent Roberts guessed.

"Like I said, your shadow is unusually powerful. I was surprised when I found out *just* how powerful it was. In fact, I had to take extra steps to protect myself from it. When I did that, I triggered a self-defense mechanism in it or awakened it or something like that. I really don't know exactly how it all works."

"So you *did* cause it to happen." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"I responded to it being more powerful than expected, then it responded to my response. So yes, in that way I caused it." Milo carefully explained.

"But you're still saying that even though you caused it, somehow it's still not *really* your fault?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"I'm saying that there wasn't any reason to believe that stealing your shadow would cause any harm to you or it... or me."

"Did it hurt you?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"No. At least, it didn't cause me an injury. What it did would be considered more of a violation." Milo said uncomfortably.

"Unless you really feel the need to share what happened, I'm just as happy to take you at your word on that and move on."

"Thank you." Milo said sincerely, then continued, "But what I was trying to say is that no one could have predicted that your shadow would be capable of functioning at such a high level. The truth of the matter is I'm relieved that it's been returned to you. It could actually be quite dangerous if it had escaped from me."

"Dangerous? How could a shadow even survive on its own?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"In dark corners and spaces, mostly out of sight. When a shadow becomes displaced like that, they're usually referred to as shadow demons. And while they aren't *literal* demons, they *can* be terrifying and dangerous."

"We've gotten off track. What can you tell me about the state my shadow is in now?"

"He's bound to you again, which is his natural state. Not only is he unable to break free from you, but I seriously doubt that he would want to. As to his reaction to me... he seems to have retained some ability to think and act independently. That will probably fade as time goes on."

"How sure are you of that?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"About as sure as I was that taking your shadow from you wouldn't cause a problem." Milo said frankly.

"So, you don't know." Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"I know what's *supposed* to happen, but when it comes to your shadow, that doesn't seem to mean a whole lot."

A sudden flurry of gasps and hushed whispers drew Agent Roberts and Milo's attention.

They followed the fascinated gazes of the congregation to a lone figure walking out of the protectorate.

"I guess it's time for me to earn my pay for the week." Agent Roberts said as he released the snap on his holster and took hold of his gun.

"If I had any magical attacks, I'd offer to help you." Milo said weakly.

"Help me by keeping these people back here and under control." Agent Roberts said as he started walking toward the archway of the protectorate.

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts approached the solitary figure, he could tell that something was off about it. While he could get faint glimpses of what might be thought of as a classic angel, complete with a glowing halo and wings, what he saw beneath was a grotesque

monster, seven feet tall and thin to the point of almost being skeletal. Although, if it had been of average height and weight, it would still be distinguishable by the abundance of arms at its sides, fanned out to support the illusion of wings.

"I'm sorry but I'm afraid that I can't allow you to go any further." Agent Roberts said once he was within earshot.

The strange being cocked its head at an odd angle, then began speaking in a grunting series of noises that sounded nothing like any spoken language Agent Roberts had ever heard.

Before he could formulate what to do about their apparent communication impasse, he suddenly realized that he could *almost* understand what the creature was saying.

He certainly wasn't making sense out of the guttural and, quite frankly, disgusting sounds. On some internal level there was an awareness of whispered words also being spoken, although not audibly. Somewhere between the two failed methods of communication, Agent Roberts could begin to get a sense of what the being was trying to convey.

Suddenly, it all began to make sense to him. Thanks to the amulet that he had been given, he wasn't seeing what the being wanted him to see. Likewise, he wasn't hearing what he was intended to hear. Apparently, by way of magic or telepathy, the creature could make other beings see itself as it wished to be seen and make itself understood.

"Sorry. Your magic doesn't work on me. You don't have to put on an act. I can see what you really are." Agent Roberts said frankly.

As the creature spoke, Agent Roberts began to get the thoughts and concepts that the creature was trying to convey through the combination of grunts and whispered speech.

"Yes. I can sort of understand you. I don't know what your real name is, but it's translating to mean something like 'the child of the

sword'. Would you mind if I called you 'Reaper'?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

The being seemed not only agreeable, but downright happy with Agent Roberts' choice of name.

"Good. I'm Agent Roberts. Now, as I was saying, you can't be out here. Not only is this place not safe for you, but it's also possible that you could be a threat to the people who live here."

Reaper grunted and gurgled a little, trying to explain the reason for the trip outside.

"I suppose that's true. And besides, if all goes as planned, you probably won't get another chance."

Reaper grunted one small phrase, then waited.

"There's no way that I'm going to allow you to explore the outside world on your own, but I would be honored to escort you and introduce you to the natives. Just remember, that you aren't allowed to eat them or take any of them home with you. Leave them as you found them." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

Reaper happily agreed.

Agent Roberts extended an elbow in Reaper's direction and felt as it set two or three hands on his elbow, to be formally escorted.

* * * * *

As they slowly walked back toward where the others were waiting, Agent Roberts said, "The only people I met while I was visiting the protectorate before were Marklah and Linnaeus."

Reaper grunted a quick response.

"I don't think there's a direct translation for what you just said, but I *think* you said that Len was your demi-brother, or your brother once removed. I'm not sure how that works, but he seemed like a nice enough person when we met him. Very friendly."

Reaper laughed, then grunted something which Agent Roberts took to mean 'close enough'.

* * * * *

"Milo, I'd like to introduce you to Reaper. We've decided that since we have the opportunity, I'll introduce Reaper around. When this is all over, Reaper will be able to go back to the protectorate and tell everyone what it's like out here." Agent Roberts said pleasantly.

Reaper grunted something that made Agent Roberts have to consider for a moment.

"Calling Milo my *friend* might be a bit of a stretch, but I don't want to kill him anymore. Is that close enough?" Agent Roberts asked thoughtfully.

Reaper grunted again and Agent Roberts smiled at the response.

"Can you understand him?" Milo asked curiously.

"More or less." Agent Roberts responded, then turned to Reaper and asked, "Can you speak to Milo so that he can understand you?"

Reaper grunted a response, then faced Milo and carefully said, "To speak to one requires me to attune to that mind. Your demi-friend is kind enough to meet me halfway."

"It looks to me like our vocabularies don't match up very well, so Reaper's concepts don't always translate directly into something that we can understand." Agent Roberts explained.

Reaper grunted while looking at the congregation gathered behind Milo, looking on in awe.

Agent Roberts looked at Reaper to see what image was being projected toward them.

Reaper had taken on a 'male' persona and appeared to be a more human looking version of itself. All in all, 'he' looked freakishly tall and thin, almost to the point of not being physically possible in the

real world. While his face appeared to be pleasant enough, he also looked somewhat drawn.

"Come on over here and I'll introduce you to Jen." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

Reaper grunted something that made Agent Roberts suddenly laugh.

"No. I already told you that you can't eat any of them, not even Milo."

Reaper gave a snort and a grunt in response.

"Naw. He'd probably be stringy." Agent Roberts said as they walked, then added, "And I bet that he'd give you gas."

Reaper's laugh was a strange sound, which was saying something considering the 'normal' sounds that Reaper made.

* * * * *

"Jen, I'd like for you to meet Reaper." Agent Roberts said as they approached.

"No. She's not what she appears to be." Jen said as she spread her arms and motioned for the people behind her to back away.

Agent Roberts glanced at Reaper to find that 'she' had indeed taken on female attributes.

"It's okay Jen. This is just how she can meet people without freaking them out. They might be afraid or even run away if they saw her true form." Agent Roberts explained.

"If you could see through her illusion, you wouldn't be acting so calm around her." Jen said challengingly.

"I've seen through her illusion from the beginning. I've determined that she's a person of good will. To be honest, I'd trust Reaper a lot farther than I'd trust you."

"Is this one also you're demi-friend?" Reaper asked slowly, obviously so that Jen could understand.

"Once removed." Agent Roberts responded, then explained, "At this point in time, we share a common goal, which is to improve your protectorate so that you won't have to worry about being discovered."

"This one, can see like Reaper, can do like Reaper. At the core, at the center, we are sisters." Reaper said slowly, mostly to Jen.

Agent Roberts saw the shiver of revulsion in Jen and couldn't help but smile.

"Come with me and I'll introduce you to my team... that is, if they're available. They're working on the protectorate right now, so if they're busy, we might have to leave them alone."

Reaper let out a grunt of agreement to the arrangement.

Although Agent Roberts couldn't say that he quite understood everything about Reaper, he wasn't worried about what he didn't understand. He felt that Reaper was seeing what needed to be seen and that when Reaper returned to the Protectorate, it would be a benefit to all of them.

* * * * *

"Dag? Are you at a point where I can interrupt you for a minute?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Actually, yes. This has turned out to be quite a bit larger than originally anticipated. There's no way that we're going to be able to complete our work in one session. I've just withdrawn for a few minutes to collect myself before formulating some more realistic plans."

"Reaper, I'd like to introduce you to someone who actually *is* my friend. This is Dag Hansen, he's a teacher and one of the people responsible for improving the protectorate." Agent Roberts said pleasantly.

"Pleasure, it is to be meeting." Reaper said slowly and respectfully.

"What... Who?..." Dag stammered in confusion.

"Reaper is one of the Nephilim who decided to take a peek at the outside world before the protectorate is closed off again."

"As I understand the properties of the protectorate, one who leaves it loses the protections enjoyed inside. Please, be very careful. It's likely that you will be fully mortal while you're out here."

"I give thanks for concern." Reaper said slowly.

"Please enjoy your visit. I hope that it will meet your expectations." Mr. Hansen said with a genuine smile.

"Expectations surpassed with meeting friend." Reaper assured him.

"Do you think there's any possibility for Reaper to meet Zanner and Dex?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

Mr. Hansen looked at the boys for a long moment, then slowly said, "I think they're almost at a good breaking point. If you'll wait for a moment, I believe that they will both appreciate the diversion."

"You don't mind, do you?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

Reaper's grunted response took a moment for Agent Roberts to translate. But he finally responded by saying, "Dex and Zanner are young of our kind, but they're not mine or Mr. Hansen's. We've been given responsibility to watch over them and instruct them in how to renovate a barrier."

Reaper grunted inquisitively.

"Zanner is a witch, if I'm understanding the use of the terminology correctly, he would be considered an Earth Mage. Dex is what is known as an Oriad." Agent Roberts explained.

Reaper considered for a moment, then carefully asked, "The mountain spirit of Earth is given flesh in this place?"

"I really don't know any more about it than what I've told you. I'm a human and I just met these people a few days ago. If you have a question, you might ask Dex about it yourself."

"Reaper, I'd like for you to meet Zanner and Dex." Mr. Hansen said happily as he led the two boys.

"Honor. Respect." Reaper said slowly.

Although Zanner seemed to be speechless, Dex was able to quietly ask, "Are you a Nephilim?"

"That's right. Your magic won't work on Dex either. He won't be able to see or hear what you want him to." Agent Roberts explained.

"Reaper can borrow common language." Reaper said slowly, then looked to Dex and continued, "My people... have been called many things... that is among the more pleasant. Thank you."

"My mother is a witch and my father is a human. So in a way, we're the same. We each came from parents who are completely different from what we are." Dex explained happily.

"We are called monsters..." Reaper began to explain, but was interrupted.

"If I called you a duck, would that make you a duck?" Zanner challenged. "Would you have to waddle and quack, just because I called you that?"

"I have not seen the creature that you speak of, but I get the imagery from you. No, I will not become a duck if you call me such." Reaper slowly admitted.

"I'm just learning what I am. I thought I knew before, but it was all just words." Dex said quietly.

"Even if your parents had both been *exactly* like you, you'd still be yourself. No one gets to decide what that means but you." Zanner said firmly.

"But it helps if you're around people who see you as being something good." Dex said as he glanced at Agent Roberts, then added, "Maybe even a little better than you see yourself."

"So young. Such wisdom. You will do well." Reaper said slowly and respectfully.

"Naw. We'll probably find *some* way to screw it up." Zanner said with a grin, then added, "But we won't let that keep us down. We've got some pretty good examples to follow and people to go to for help when we need it."

"More wisdom." Reaper said warmly.

"I'm going to take Reaper back to the protectorate now, so you guys can get back to work." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"Don't worry, Reaper. We're going to fix it so that you and your people can be safe for a long time." Zanner said confidently.

"I will tell others. We will be secure." Reaper assured him, then added, "Be well young friends."

"You too." Zanner called after them.

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After a few minutes of walking, Reaper quietly said, "You know who I am."

"I know some of it, but not everything." Agent Roberts admitted.

"Tell me of what you know."

"You can go back to your real language if you like, I think I understand it better even if I don't always have the right words to express the concepts that you're using."

Reaper grunted a response, to which Agent Roberts grinned.

"What I know about you is kind of like how your language comes to me. I get phrases and complete trains of thought, but due to the

differences in language structure or something, those concepts don't always translate directly into words. I get the sense that you're someone important... dangerous... but not malicious. You're a kind hearted person who is doing what you believe is right, even though you're taking a risk by doing so." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

Reaper gave a short grunt to prompt him to continue.

"I get the feeling that the next time the angels come to visit, that you're going to report what you observed, not just about the 'keeper' but also about those who helped him to improve and reinforce the barrier." Agent Roberts said speculatively.

After a long silent moment of walking, Reaper grunted in acknowledgement.

"Let me be honest with you. What the angels think of us doesn't concern me in the slightest. It may be of some importance to Archdruid Highley or his brothers, but my stake in all of this is to see that all the people who don't have a say in what's happening end up better off rather than worse. That's it. There's no 'higher power' compelling me to help one group over another. I don't see *my* people being the humans, but rather everyone who will be impacted by the decisions made by those with power."

Reaper let loose a single grunt of a question, filled with meaning.

"Because no matter how I look at it, it's the right thing to do. The Wudewas, the Brynns, the Nephilim, the residents of Waxell and even those idiots who follow Archdruid Highley need someone to watch out for them. They're not in a position to protect themselves... I am. So I will."

As they arrived at the archway of the protectorate, Reaper stopped, then said in a slow, respectful voice, "Would that I could join you on your mission. I find it to be worthy."

"You have your own mission. We all do... that is, if we have the courage to acknowledge what's in front of us and commit to doing something about it." Agent Roberts said with conviction.

"We, of the protectorate, look upon the angels as not only our parents, but as our betters. They are pure and we are defiled."

"They're people who made choices. If you take the time to think about *why* your people exist, you'll probably realize that *you're* not the ones who were defiled. You're just the byproduct."

"We are told not to interrogate the motives of our betters. We cannot judge them by our standards of right and wrong."

"Well, isn't that convenient? They can do whatever they want for any or no reason and you're not allowed to even question it? I think that maybe they don't want you to ask questions because the answers would make them look quite a bit less 'pure'."

"Perhaps."

"Your language is getting a lot better. Does that mean that you're becoming more attuned to my mind?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Yes. I find it increasingly easy to formulate my thoughts into terms that are familiar to you." Reaper agreed.

"This makes conversation easier, but I feel like I got to know you better when you were using your own language and I was just getting the unfiltered meanings. The words are like boxes and when you trim your concepts to fit into those boxes, something is lost."

"Likewise. I feel that I have gotten to know more about you in what you haven't said than what you have."

"I guess it's time for you to go back now. I'm glad that you were able to come out for a visit."

"Yes. As am I. It was a rare opportunity, the memory of which I will cherish."

"So will I. Be well, Reaper, Child of the Sword."

"Be well, Agent Roberts, advocate for those with no voice."

Agent Roberts was surprised by the title, but decided to wear it proudly.

As Reaper turned to walk into the protectorate, Agent Roberts quietly added, "My friends call me Shawn."

"Be well, Shawn." Reaper said before continuing on.

Chapter 31

As Agent Roberts approached the trio, he saw that Mr. Hansen was silently watching over Dex and Zanner while they appeared to be whispering and scheming together.

"Is there a problem?" Agent Roberts asked as he walked to Mr. Hansen's side.

"Not at all. We simply have to make some accommodations due to there being an obstructive barrier inside the folded space. We hadn't originally anticipated that." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"Are you saying that you didn't pick that up when you did your initial evaluation?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"That's right. It's actually quite ingenious how it was done. The obstructive barrier is a completely separate spelling from anything else that we were able to detect. Whereas one might normally trace a spell back to its root, then find what other spells were also tapping into the same elemental reservoir, this spelling derives its magic from a completely different and unrelated source from all the more obvious spellings that surround it. It's really very exciting."

"I suppose... if you're into that sort of thing." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"However, as interesting a development as this is, it won't significantly impact our timetable. We just have to make a few allowances for it." Mr. Hansen assured him.

"This other source of power that it's drawing on, do we have the personnel that we'll need to handle it safely?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"We have the best." Mr. Hansen said with a smile at Dex and Zanner, then explained, "The spell is based in earth, just like the others, but this one is based in the earth native to this location and dimension. The other spells rely on the created angelic earth from

within the folded space. This is actually very smart because if someone were trying to covertly dismantle the shielding of the protectorate, this would provide a rather effective roadblock for them."

"So *this* shield doesn't use the angelic earth element at all?"

"No. It uses natural magic drawn from the earth element from the native land."

"How likely do you think it is that this might be in place to prevent someone on the inside from getting *out*?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I can't say how likely it is, but from what I've studied about the Nephilim, I can believe that such a thing is possible. Left entirely on their own, I'm sure that they would go extinct in a short amount of time. Given their hostile natures and shortsighted behaviors, it would stand to reason that special accommodations would have to be made to facilitate their continued existence."

"I was looking at it more from the standpoint of them being prisoners held against their will, but when you put it that way, it isn't quite as black and white as it first appears. From my admittedly ignorant point of view, it looks to me like the people who set this up put this unique barrier in place for a specific reason. It looks to me like they might have gone to such lengths as a way of preventing those with access to angelic magic from dismantling the shield from the inside."

"That's possible. But the truth is that it doesn't matter. We will strive to reinforce the barrier regardless of the reason for its initial construction. Trying to divine the motives of angels and gods is a fools game. I caution you not to go looking for trouble. You will no doubt find it." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"Do you know what the 'I' in FBI stands for?" Agent Roberts asked with an impish grin, then before Mr. Hansen could respond, he answered, "It stands for 'I'm looking for trouble'."

"I'll keep that in mind." Mr. Hansen said with a smile.

"But considering what I've witnessed and overheard since I've been here, I agree that you're probably right. The 'protectorate' is just that, a place created to protect beings who couldn't survive in fair competition with the other species... or even amongst themselves. I guess that explains something else. They get reborn over and over again because it's the only way to keep them from dying out." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Possibly. But it's also said that the Nephilim are typically born sterile. That would be another reason for someone to have taken steps to preserve them in this manner. They are incapable of maintaining or increasing their number." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"While we were inside the protectorate, we saw that Marklah, one of the Nephilim, had a baby. Admittedly, it was speculated that it might be the reincarnation of her husband, but even so, having a baby would prove that she's fertile."

"That's not necessarily true. In such a situation, traditional definitions may not apply. It may come down to how one might define the difference, if any, between fertility and immaculate conception."

"I suppose that as long as we both know what we're talking about that it doesn't matter what we call it. But your point about infertility makes sense. I noticed that Reaper didn't appear to be of a specific gender, but at the time I didn't consider that there might be a logical reason for it."

"I'm surprised that you chose to introduce him around like that. I would have thought that you'd be trying to keep him contained within the protectorate."

"To be honest, I had intended to do just that. But after a few minutes of conversation, my diplomatic training kicked in and I started treating Reaper as a visiting dignitary."

"I'm glad that it turned out that way. It seemed to mean the world to him. I think it also served to show Archdruid Highley's followers how a person faced with unexpected circumstances can respond with dignity and decorum."

"Like I give a rat's ass about what Archdruid Highley's followers think." Agent Roberts grumbled.

"Well then... so much for dignity and decorum." Mr. Hansen finished with a grin.

"We're done. We've got the whole thing mapped out. Do you want to check it out?" Zanner asked excitedly.

"That didn't take as long as I thought it would. Yes. Show me what you've come up with." Mr. Hansen said as he moved to where the boys were working.

To show his support, Agent Roberts decided to follow along and listen in as the boys reported on what they had been able to discover, even though he was certain that he wouldn't understand one word of what they would be saying.

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Surprisingly enough, Agent Roberts was able to get the gist of what the boys were describing. By using their access to the earth element, they were able to trace the usage of natural earth magic to each of the contact points with the barrier, thereby providing a pattern that could be used to distribute a new or supplementary spell.

"So what does that mean for the spell that we're going to be working on?" Agent Roberts finally asked.

Dex and Zanner seemed to be just as curious as Agent Roberts and were awaiting the answer with anticipation.

Mr. Hansen considered for a moment, then finally responded, "We're somewhat limited in what we *can* do while the druids are performing their blessings. I believe the most productive thing that

we can do at this time is to begin instituting some of Paul's technomage modifications to the obstructive barrier."

"As I understand it, Paul's magic is very specific and you have to have a natural talent for it to be able to use it. In fact, Paul can't even use the magic himself. He needs for Filipe to cast the spells for him."

"Quite right. The modifications that I am speaking of are earth based spells which address the same concerns that Paul's spells do. We can use earth magic to incorporate diffusion and obfuscation properties into the shielding to negate the capabilities of aerial and satellite surveillance."

"Do you have everything that you're going to need to be able to do that?"

"Under normal circumstances, we would need several more people, a variety of items, both magical and mundane, and quite a bit of time. But with Dex's help, I believe that we should be able to achieve our goals with just the spells."

"How does Dex change that?"

"Think of trying to hit a target with a single shot. Dex basically gives us a shotgun blast."

"So you're able to sacrifice precision in favor of increased power?"

"Not exactly. But we can eliminate the need for complex rituals and supplies, since we don't have to 'augment' the spell. Our *aim* doesn't need to be nearly as precise. The spell can function perfectly well in its natural state."

"Or *supernatural* state." Agent Roberts said with a grin.

Mr. Hansen stared at him for a moment, then slowly said, "Yes. If you'd like to think of it that way."

Zanner and Dex were trying to fight down their laughter at the exchange.

"So, what do we have to do next?"

"Right this minute, we need to go over the spells. We'll start casting them as soon as they're ready."

"Between planning and casting, how long do you think everything will take?"

"I'd guess about three hours, more or less."

"Do you think that we'll have the time or energy to do more once you're done with that?"

"Likely not. I can imagine that we'll all be feeling a bit burnt around the edges by the end of such an ambitious casting."

"What do you think the chances are that the druids will be done by then?"

"I have no idea. I don't know enough about how their magic works to be able to make a wild guess."

"I'm surprised to find out that priests and people like that *really do* have magic. All this time I thought it was just an act."

"For the most part it is. But there are a rare few clerics who have been granted legitimate power. I can't really tell you much more than that. It's not something I've ever had occasion to deal with before."

"But you think that their blessings will actually help your situation?"

"Possibly. They certainly won't hurt."

"Well, even if it does nothing else, it gives the druids the opportunity to contribute. That sort of puts us all on the same side of things."

"My only concern in all of it is the possibility that it might end up causing a problem for Paul. What we're doing essentially makes the entire protectorate toxic to him. That might come back to haunt us at some future time."

"Still, from an 'outside' point of view, it seems like a reasonable way to safeguard the protectorate."

"Quite right. Anyone attempting to use incompatible magic within the protectorate would be severely limited in what they could do."

"What about your 'nature' magic?"

"Even that would be somewhat limited, although that only applies 'within' the barrier. Everything that *we'll* be doing is on the outside."

"Sounds good. Just let me know when you're ready to start and I'll get out of your way."

"I think we've had enough of a rest." Mr. Hansen said, then turned to the boys and asked, "Have you decided what you'd like to do?"

"Yeah. There's a spell that I know to create a mirage that I think we can cast on the whole protectorate." Zanner said happily.

"That sounds promising. Go through the spell with us and we'll see if we can make it work on this scale."

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Agent Roberts wandered away as the trio began discussing the technical details of Zanner's spell.

"How's it going, Milo?" Agent Roberts asked as he approached, keeping careful watch on his shadow as he did so.

"I became a druid so that I could remain part of the human world that I grew up in, since it's the only world I know, but still have access to the magical world that I'm also a part of." Milo said introspectively.

"This may be a little off topic, but where does stealing my shadow fit into that?"

"If you found out that there was a threat to the protectorate, wouldn't you want to do something to help?"

"Of course. That's what I'm doing here."

"Jarvis had the vision that the boys needed to be here to save the protectorate. I did what I thought was right to make sure that the boys would be here when they were needed. I admit that I caused more problems than I solved, but at the time it seemed like the best thing that I could do."

"Well, if you hadn't made contact with us, we might not have known that the protectorate existed. While trying to update the Southseid barrier, we could have unintentionally disrupted or even destroyed the linked barriers. So, by a certain way of thinking, you actually *did* save the protectorate by making us aware of it."

"Thank you for saying so. Looking back at it, I suppose that there probably was a way that I could have accomplished our goals without causing you so much trouble."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Agent Roberts said simply, then continued, "What matters most right now is to do the right thing going forward. If you feel that you made mistakes, learn from them and try to make better decisions in the future."

"I'm a little afraid of what the future's going to hold for me. With Jarvis inviting everyone to witness this, everything's going to change. I'm not sure of what part I'm going to play now that we're going to have all these 'followers'."

"I don't know either, Milo. I guess that you'll have to face each new thing as it comes and do your best to make sound decisions."

"I'm used to the way things were."

"Like it or not, you can't go back. You can either face the future with courage or run and hide from it."

"I have courage. But I work best when there's someone around to tell me what to do next. Once I've been told that, I usually don't have any problem making myself do it."

"While that may be a good way to get along in a cult, it's a miserable way to live your life."

"When I decide things for myself, I usually end up making a big mess."

"That happens. But whether you're good at it or not, you really need to make your own decisions. Otherwise you're not living your own life, you're allowing someone else to live your life for you."

"You don't know how it is..."

"Trust me. I know *exactly* how it is. I have a domineering mother who did her best to micromanage my every thought and feeling well into my adult life. I finally snapped out of it when I went into the service, but up until then, I never even *considered* my own feelings regarding the decisions being made about my life."

"I guess you *do* know how it is. I was sixteen when my mom brought me to Archdruid Highley... I mean Ambros, not Jarvis... she brought me here and left me with them. Ever since then I've just been doing what I'm told."

"The problem with life is that things change. People change. If you continue to allow others to run your life and do all the thinking for you, there might come a day when you'll find yourself on your own and you'll be ill-equipped to make decisions for yourself."

"Even if I wanted to do it, I wouldn't know where to start."

"I don't know either, Milo. I guess that you'll have to decide that you're going to be your own person and then start making decisions for yourself. I'm pretty sure that the more you do it, the better you'll get at it. If you keep it up, before you know it you'll be ready to live independently."

"I don't know if that's even something that I want. I mean, it sounds lonely."

"It's possible to be alone in a crowd of people. It's also possible to be perfectly at peace in your own company. How you *feel* is

something that you can control for yourself. It's no one else's responsibility."

"I never said that it was." Milo responded cautiously.

"I'm just emphasizing that point because a lot of people seem to get hung up on that one concept. They seem to think that the world is somehow supposed to bend over backward to cater to their feelings. If they're not happy, then *the world* needs to change, not them. If you're not buying into that mindset, then you're already doing better than a lot of people that I've met."

"Well, maybe I do that a little bit, but I'm not too bad. At least, I don't do it all the time." Milo finished defensively.

"I believe you." Agent Roberts assured him, then added, "I just mentioned it because it seems to come up so often in my dealings with people... not around Waxell, but back in DC, when I was still living there."

"Most of what I know about the outside world is from television. I haven't been away from Nevermore very much since I arrived here, so I haven't seen much of anything for myself. Catching that flight to meet up with your group is the most that I've ever been around regular people."

"Really? I never would have guessed. The only thing that tipped us off about you was your interest in the kids. That was kind of creepy."

"Milo! Are you going to help me or not?!" Jen asked indignantly.

"Everything's fine. As long as everyone stays back, there isn't anything for us to do." Milo responded.

"Jarvis is counting on us to keep order until he gets back!" Jen snapped.

"Like how?"

"You need to let people know what's going on and that everything's going to be alright."

"I think they understand that. There's *literally* nothing happening."

"It looks like you've got this. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help." Agent Roberts said as he turned to leave.

"Just watch out where you cast your shadow. When the sun starts setting and the shadows get longer it could feel emboldened and decide that it wants to cause trouble."

"I'll keep an eye on it." Agent Roberts assured him, then walked back toward Mr. Hansen and the boys to see how they were doing.

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When Agent Roberts arrived, he found that all three seemed to be completely lost in their spellcasting.

"Zanner, have you got it?" Mr. Hansen asked distantly as he held his arms rigidly out before him.

"Yeah. How you doin Dex?" Zanner responded.

"I'm good. I'm stabilizing the magical flow. Just let me know if you need more."

"No. I'm good. Keep it just like that." Zanner said firmly.

Agent Roberts watched the three but couldn't see any indication that they were doing anything.

He glanced back toward 'the congregation' and found them waiting with anticipation for something to happen.

"I'm ready with the first mirage. Do you want me to turn it loose so that we can see how it works?" Zanner asked slowly.

"Hold on and let me look it over first. It'll just take me a minute." Mr. Hansen said decisively.

"Let me know when you're ready." Zanner responded as he maintained his intense focus.

"How are you doing Agent Roberts?" Dex asked as he turned.

"I'm fine. How are you?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"I'm great. This isn't anything like I thought it would be. I thought that I'd be here while Zanner and Mr. Hansen did all the work, but regulating the raw magical flow and keeping it stable is really helping them. If I weren't here they'd have to fight to tame the magic before they'd be able to use it." Dex said happily.

"That looks good, Zanner. Go ahead." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

"Excuse me." Dex said as he turned to face the vast expanse of the protectorate.

"*I call upon the earth to grant shelter and protection for the children of heaven. Heat of earth, cold of earth, heat of air and cold of water be joined in this my spell. So let it be*." Zanner called out in a firm confident voice.

As Agent Roberts watched, the image of the protectorate before them began to waver and shimmer.

Although he heard murmurs from the congregation, he kept his attention focused in front of him.

After nearly a minute of shimmering in the distance, the image seemed to stabilize, returning to how it had been before.

"Did it not work?" Agent Roberts asked hesitantly.

"I'm pretty sure it did. The magic felt right when it took hold. Remember that illusionary magic doesn't work on either one of us." Dex said informatively.

"That looks good. Now we need to do the same thing six more times to cover the entire protectorate." Mr. Hansen said enthusiastically.

"Are you up to it Dex?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Yeah. No problem." Dex immediately responded.

"Zanner? How are you doing?" Mr. Hansen asked more slowly.

"I'm good. Give me a minute to get the final version of the spell all sorted in my head and I'll be ready to go again." Zanner finished with a smile.

"Take as much time as you need." Mr. Hansen said patiently.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but recall what he and Mr. Darroch had discussed about witches getting lost in the joy and wonder of plying their craft. Although Zanner didn't appear to be in any danger, he was certainly getting some kind of a rush from performing such a powerful and high-level spell.

"Agent Roberts?" Dex said quietly.

"What can I do for you, Dex?"

"Your shadow..." Dex said hesitantly as he looked down.

Agent Roberts followed his gaze and found his shadow trying to climb up Dex's leg.

"Stop that!" Agent Roberts snapped and his shadow immediately retreated.

Once he was assured that the shadow wasn't going to move toward Dex again, he said, "We've got work to do right now. Later, when we get home, we'll figure something out for you. I'm not disregarding your feelings, but we have a job to do. Are you with me?"

Agent Roberts shadow didn't show any sign of comprehending his words.

"You know, if you decide to *help* me instead of just doing whatever you feel like in the moment, we might be able to achieve both our goals through cooperation." Agent Roberts explained.

"I don't think it can understand you." Dex cautiously ventured.

"I think he understands more than he lets on. He just doesn't want me to know so that he can get away with playing dumb. It's probably safer for him to be thought of as a playful 'pet' rather than a thinking feeling being with his own agency."

"If you say so..." Dex said hesitantly.

"Shadow, let Dex know that you're sorry for trying to molest him so that we can get back to work." Agent Roberts said to his shadow.

Both Dex and Agent Roberts watched as nothing seemed to happen.

"When Milo took you away from me, I did what he asked just so that I could get you back. You weren't given away, you were stolen from me." Agent Roberts said firmly, then asked more gently, "Do you want to work with me and help me? Do you want to be my teammate?"

As both Dex and Agent Roberts watched, Agent Roberts' shadow suddenly began to stretch out of proportion away from Dex and toward 'the congregation', more specifically, toward Milo.

"Find a way to let me know what kind of revenge you want and I'll see what I can do to get you satisfaction." Agent Roberts said evenly.

When his shadow retracted, it shifted on the ground, then began growing toward Dex.

"He's not going to hurt you. He just wants to say that he's sorry." Agent Roberts said in a gentle calming tone.

"That's alright. He doesn't have to. He didn't hurt me. He just grabbed my leg." Dex said nervously.

"It's important that when he does something wrong that he's held to account." Agent Roberts said simply, then smiled slightly as the shadow seemed to climb up Dex and surround him.

"I can feel him. He's hugging me." Dex said in wonder.

"That's good. As long as he's not getting too *familiar* as he does it." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"No. It's fine." Dex said as the shadow began to recede.

"Thank you Shadow. That was very nice of you." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"Yeah. Thanks." Dex said in wonder at what he had just experienced.

"Dex? Are you ready to go again?" Zanner asked from a few feet away.

"Yeah. I'm ready when you are." Dex said as he turned his attention to what Zanner and Mr. Hansen were doing.

Agent Roberts watched as Dex stepped away to join them, then said toward his shadow, "It's good to have you back. Now that I know you're here, I'll make sure that you won't be neglected."

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Mr. Hansen, Zanner and Dex were silent as they worked collectively to perform their spells over the entire protectorate.

The congregation seemed to have settled in to watch what was happening, although there honestly wasn't much for them to see.

As he was about to turn his attention back to Mr. Hansen and the boys, he noticed Milo walking away from the congregation and directly toward him.

"What's going on, Milo?"

"I was wondering if you knew what was being planned. Some of the people have questions about what's going on and I don't know what to tell them."

"Right now they're performing spells to hide the protectorate from the sight of aircraft and satellite surveillance, even when it's fully in our dimension. If I understood correctly, they're going to finish their

spells, then twist the protectorate out of our space again before calling it a night."

"So they're planning to do that thing with the wind that they did earlier?"

"As far as I know. Yes."

"Good. Then I'll let people know that all they can expect to see tonight is more of what they've already seen."

"I think that's a reasonable summary..." Agent Roberts began to say, then noticed his shadow sliding up Milo's leg.

"Aggh!" Milo screamed as he hurriedly backed away.

Agent Roberts' shadow seemed to stretch for a moment, but finally retreated.

"Sorry. I wasn't watching where he was going." Agent Roberts said as he fought to restrain a grin.

"Listen, there isn't anything else that I can do about your shadow, but if it gets to be too much of a problem, let me know and I can try to get in touch with my dad. He's a master shadowmancer. He'll know how to fix it."

"No thanks. Shadow's already had too much stuff done to him. I'll figure out some way to make things work without hurting him any further."

"Your shadow isn't like a person, it's just a reservoir, like a bladder. In fact, it's not even that important. You don't *need* it for anything."

"Maybe he was like that before you broke him away from me, but now he's a being with his own thoughts and feelings. Admittedly, most of those thoughts and feelings seem to involve getting revenge on you, but he's still his own person. I won't let you hurt him any more." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"If that's what you believe, I'll respect your feelings. I promise that I won't cause your shadow anymore harm... well, except in self defense. He keeps groping me."

"Maybe he doesn't hate you as much as he wants to get close to you. Sneaking up on you and groping you may just be the only way he has of doing that." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Then perhaps your next pursuit may need to be teaching your shadow some manners." Milo said as he continued looking at the ground, keeping careful watch on where Agent Roberts' shadow was casting.

"We've already had a little talk about that. I get the feeling that Shadow will be able to figure it out pretty soon. But what happens between you and him is your own business. I'm not going to tell him that he can't have his revenge... or romance, whichever way it ends up working out. You caused this. You get to deal with it."

"Do you *really* think that it... *he* likes me?" Milo asked cautiously.

"I don't know if *like* is the right word. It might be more accurate to say that he seems to be *attracted* to you... or maybe he's just fixated on his revenge." Agent Roberts finished with a slight shrug, then thought to ask, "But if he *really* wanted to hurt you, he could, couldn't he?"

"An experienced shadowmancer can strangle, blind or even crush an opponent using only their control of shadows. I have no reason to believe that your shadow wouldn't be capable of inflicting the same level of damage."

"So Shadow is *choosing* not to seriously injure you. It's possible that he just wants your attention and doesn't know a better way of getting it."

"It's also possible that he's aware that I can destroy him. I haven't done so because I wanted to return your shadow to you as I had promised. But it *is* within my power to do so."

"That's good to know, but I still think that he's being more playful than threatening with you. At the core of it, he's a lover, not a fighter."

"*That* I can believe." Milo immediately agreed, then added, "I've never encountered so much unresolved sexual tension and frustration concentrated in one place. You *seriously* need to get laid."

"Yes. You said that before." Agent Roberts said with a slight smile, then added, "Well, if you'll just hold still for a few minutes, maybe Shadow can dissipate some of that sexual tension he's got stored up. It could solve a lot of problems at once."

"You can't be serious." Milo said hesitantly.

"That's right. I'm *not* serious." Agent Roberts said with a grin, then added more professionally, "Let your people know that there's probably not going to be much else to see today. At the most it'll be more of the same."

"I'll let them know." Milo confirmed, then looked toward the ground where Agent Roberts shadow appeared to be spread out innocently, just like any other shadow.

After a moment to consider, Milo quietly said, "Shadow, if you really don't hate me, maybe we can find a way that we can... I don't know... be friends? Or, at least not terrorize each other."

Agent Roberts watched carefully and didn't notice any reaction.

Finally, he quietly said, "Let him think about it. I can imagine that it's hard for him to find different ways to express himself."

"Fair enough. Hopefully we'll be able to find a way that we can get along." Milo said before walking away.

Agent Roberts watched him leave, then said down to his shadow, "Good job. If you can manage to behave yourself like that when you need to, we're going to get along fine."

The shadow suddenly receded and virtually disappeared.

"Right. It's time to get back to work."

***

As the sun began to set, Agent Roberts kept close watch on the protectorate.

A movement drew his attention and he watched as a lone figure emerged from the archway.

Chapter 32

Agent Roberts rushed away from the trio toward the figure emerging from the archway.

As he approached, he recognized the man slowly walking toward him.

"How are you doing Emilio? Is everything alright?"

"It was incredible." Emilio slowly muttered.

"Tell me about it. What was it like?"

"I went in there to perform the blessing. I thought it would be just like a hundred other blessings that I'd done over the years. Say the thing, do the thing, then move on, knowing that it was done."

"But this time was different?"

"I could *feel* the magic flowing through me. I could almost *taste* it. It was like I was bestowing the gifts of life and hope on the land and its occupants."

"I can't even imagine what that must feel like."

"There aren't words big and grand enough to describe it. It's like I was able to infuse the land with *joy*. Everything was made fresh and new, filled with potential and promise."

"So, do you think that your blessing will help to keep the people of the protectorate safe?"

"If any unholy being tried to do *anything* to harm *anyone* in there, the very essence of the land would rise up to stop them."

"What about the people who live inside the protectorate? Are they going to continue fighting each other?"

After a moment to consider, Emilio slowly said, "They might."

"How does that work?"

"Think about the atrocities committed in the name of righteousness throughout history. Not only are these people *subject* to those kinds of feelings, they're nearly the *embodiment* of them."

"So this could end up making them fight each other even *more*?"

"That's possible. People will fight to defend their families or loved ones from perceived threats. The Chindari see themselves as being better than the other clans and are always stirring up trouble, they might attack or be attacked just due to that."

"Who are the Chindari?"

"They're the children of the Grigori, the angels of the fifth heavenly realm who were 'given' the earthly realm to oversee. Even though the Grigori were cast out of the heavenly realms and cursed to live in darkness, the Chindari still believe that the ownership of the earthly realm is their birthright. At the same time, the children of the other choirs see the Grigori, and by extension, the Chindari, as the primary cause of their entire situation."

"So do you think that the Chindari would go so far as to disregard the fact that they're on holy ground?"

"They might. By their way of thinking, nothing is holier than they are."

"Okay. Enough said. I know the type. I can see how that could play out."

"It's just a possibility. But even if they continue to fight each other, what we've done today is still a beautiful thing. Not only seeing the blessed land, but being able to bestow that blessing. I feel like I'm a better person than I was and I want to keep on getting better and helping the people around me."

"It sounds like it changed you."

"Maybe it did. Or maybe it reminded me of how I used to be, how I really am, deep inside. It makes me want to be that way again; full of optimism and idealism."

"Those things tend to fade on their own over time. But I can see having a renewed sense of wonder being a good thing for a priest to have."

"Druid." Emilio automatically corrected.

"I think it would apply to any spiritual leader."

"I haven't been much of a leader lately... or much of an example, either." Emilio confided, then continued, "This experience makes me want to be a better person."

"There's nothing wrong with that. It seems like you could take this renewal experience into your regular life and do something amazing with it."

"I don't know how *amazing* it will be. But I suppose that rather than living each day for myself that I could find someone to share it with and make both our lives that much better and continue on from there."

"Be careful of that. Being in love with the *idea* of being in love has put many men on the path to destruction. If you go looking for love you're more likely to find something that you don't really want."

"True enough. Although the renewed purpose is great for motivation, it might not be the best for life-altering decision making."

"Good. As long as you're not going to go all googly-eyed over the first person who gives you a second glance, you should be alright."

"Am I the first one back?"

"Yes. We haven't seen any of the others since you went in."

"Would you like for me to go back in and see if I can help them?"

"Let's wait. If it starts getting late and we're still missing someone, we can send in a search party."

"Is there anything I can do to help out here?"

"There's nothing to do for the spellcasting. But it might be good to check in with Milo and Jen. Your people might appreciate some answers about what it's like inside the protectorate."

"If they had the first clue of what it's *really* like in there, they'd run away screaming."

"Unless I'm misreading the situation, you need those people to keep 'Nevermore' financially solvent."

"Right you are. Thanks to their financial support and Jud's miraculous bookkeeping, we don't have to stress out about losing the land. The tax exempt status doesn't hurt either."

"What's with the abandoned town? Why doesn't anyone live there?"

"Back when Dad ran this place, he was trying to grow 'Nevermore' into a self-sustaining religious commune. It didn't work out, but he gave it a good try. It was nice for a while. Regardless of what else you say about them, religious zealots are at least *interesting*."

"I doubt that I'd have the patience to deal with them."

"It helps if you grow up with it. Life in the outside world seems a little too *normal* to me. I miss the chaos of dozens of people, each with their own vision of utopia, all trying to change the world at the same time."

"I can see how that would cause each day to seem like its own new adventure."

Before Emilio could respond, Den emerged from the archway looking dazed and amazed.

"How'd it go, Den?" Emilio asked knowingly.

"I need to spend more time at the protectorate. That was incredible."

"If you're up to it, why don't we go and do some blessings?" Emilio asked his brother with a tranquil smile.

"Sure. Bestowing blessings is almost as big a rush as receiving them."

"What do you say, Shawn? Would you like to be blessed?" Emilio asked gently.

"No thank you. I wouldn't want to mess up the balance of forces that I've got going on right now."

"If you change your mind, you know where to find us." Den said before turning to leave.

"Yeah. We're probably going to hang around here until you guys are finished. I can't wait to see what's going to happen next." Emilio added.

"Have fun." Agent Roberts said, unable to keep from smiling at their joy.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts slowly walked over to check on Mr. Hansen and the boys, but found them concentrating on their work.

He next looked toward the congregation and found them enthralled by whatever Emilio and Den were dramatically telling them. Agent Roberts deduced that even if there weren't magic at work, Emilio and Den would probably be just as enthralling with their newfound joyous exuberance.

In the end, Agent Roberts decided to return to his position near the archway to greet any of the returning brothers, or discourage any of the residents of the protectorate from exploring the outside world.

"Are the others back yet?" Jud asked as he passed through the arch at an unhurried pace.

"Emilio and Den are here." Agent Roberts told him, then cautiously asked, "Did everything go alright?"

"Yes. I performed the blessing and everything seems to have worked as expected."

"Forgive me for asking, but your brothers appear to have had life changing experiences when they performed their blessings. Why didn't it have the same profound impact on you?"

"Probably because I'm more used to it than they are. I followed in our father's footsteps and have gathered a small group of followers so that I can pass on the shamanic-druidic teachings that I was raised with."

"But how does that make a difference now?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Because either through my contact with the angels or as a consequence of my continued work, I've been able to perform blessings for years. What I did today was more powerful and on a much larger scale, but it was no more important or fulfilling than conferring a blessing on a troubled child who needs to find some hope in their life."

"I've never had much use for religion, but I have a feeling that I might get something out of listening to what you have to say."

"I'm sure that I would enjoy that, but you've already started on your path. This part of your journey is about discovery. I help to guide those who are directionless."

"I need to get your contact information before this is all over. I've met a few people who've needed to find a direction and didn't know what to tell them."

"Although everyone seeks a direction in their life, not everyone finds it. Many are condemned to go through their lives without a purpose to guide them."

"I'm not sure whether it's better for a person to have no direction or a self-serving direction which is detrimental to society."

"It's hard to say, but the only ones I can help are those who are open to it. Someone who has already committed themselves to a purpose or a way of life are beyond my help." Jud said regretfully.

"Trust me, I know how that is. In my line of work I can't help but come in contact with people who are hopelessly corrupt."

"Hopeless, yes. That's a good way of putting it." Jud said soberly.

Agent Roberts glanced toward Emilio and Den, then quietly asked, "Do you feel like helping your brothers bless the devout followers who came when they were called?"

"As much as I don't want to interrupt their newfound faithfulness, I should probably be there to keep them from making any rookie mistakes."

"I'm sure that they'll welcome the advice of their more experienced brother."

"You don't have any brothers, do you?"

"No. Just a sister."

"Let's just say that brothers tend not to enjoy being corrected by each other. We all like to feel that we're the best at whatever we do."

"I suppose that I can see that."

"Even so, I still think that it will be nice to share in this experience with them. We don't get many opportunities to do things together anymore."

"Go ahead. I'll stay here to watch over the archway."

"Thanks for doing this Shawn. You being here is making it possible for everything to run smoothly."

"I'm happy to do it."

* * * * *

As the witches worked their spells and the druids performed their blessings, Agent Roberts stood by and kept watch on the archway.

When Cyrus stepped through he was in much the same state as Den and Emilio had been. Agent Roberts talked with him for a few minutes before watching him join his brothers.

As the sun sank lower in the sky, Agent Roberts began to become concerned and contemplated organizing a search party for the last of the brothers.

Before he could take any action, Archdruid Highley finally emerged from the protectorate, not looking like his usual self.

"Is everything alright?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"I've been such a fool." Archdruid Highley said distantly.

Although Agent Roberts couldn't dispute his words, he responded by asking, "How so?"

"All this time I've been going through the motions, thinking that I was a 'holy man', and I didn't have the first clue of what that really meant."

"But now you do?"

"I'm not arrogant enough to say that. But I think that I've caught a glimpse of the power and responsibility that I have access to, now I just have to decide if I have the courage to wield them."

"I think that it may be more a question of if you'll be able to live with yourself if you choose not to."

"I'm pretty sure that the decision's already been made. Right now I just have to find a way to wrap my mind around it."

"Well, if that's the case, then I'm going to go out on a limb and offer you some advice."

"What might that be?"

"Two things. First, don't let your own insecurities talk you out of it."

Before Archdruid Highley could respond to that, Agent Roberts continued, "Second, don't be afraid to ask your brothers for help. Keep in mind that even though they can't do what you do, they each have their own strengths, life experiences and points of view. Remember that you can draw on them to make the best decisions for all involved."

After a moment to consider, Archdruid Highley quietly said, "I'll do my best to keep that in mind."

"Your brothers are all back, if you want to go ahead and close the archway.

"Oh, yes. Thank you for reminding me." Archdruid Highley said as he performed the simple ritual to cause the archway to fade into nothingness.

"I need to get back to Mr. Hansen and the boys. Why don't you spend some time with your people? If you're going to commit to a new way of being, there's no reason to wait. You've got everyone in the same place and in the perfect frame of mind to accept as much as you're willing to give."

"Yes. That should make things easier. Thank you again, Agent Roberts. I know that it isn't part of your job. I appreciate that you're willing to go out of your way to help us."

"Just like you, I do what I can to help people."

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts approached Mr. Hansen and the boys he became concerned by what he saw.

At the risk of interrupting something important, Agent Roberts cautiously asked, "How are things going over here?"

"Zanner is about to cast the final mirage spell. As soon as he's done I'll reinstate the folded space and we'll be done for the night." Mr. Hansen answered distantly.

"All three of you look like you're exhausted. Are you sure that you're going to be up to it?"

"Yes. I'm certain of it. But don't even think about asking us to do any magic for a while after this. I think that all three of us are just about spent."

"The only thing I might ask is for some light. The sun is almost completely set and I left my flashlight back in the car."

"I think we'll be able to manage that much."

"Mr. Hansen, will you look it over? I think it's ready." Zanner asked in deep concentration.

"Hold on. I was following along with what you were doing and everything was looking good, but this is the point in the process where we're most likely to make mistakes. We need to be extra careful."

"Just let me know when you're ready for me to turn it loose."

"How are you doing, Dex?" Agent Roberts asked gently.

"I can feel the vibrations of the others through the earth element." Dex said very slowly.

"It sounds like they're almost done. It should only be a few more minutes."

"No. I don't mean Zanner and Mr. Hansen. I'm talking about Paul and G and all the others. I mean, I can't feel them if they're not using magic, but I think that I've felt everyone at some point."

"Can you tell how they're doing?"

"No. I could just tell that they were there, accessing their primary elements. I get the feeling that Paul knew that I could sense him, but I think he was the only one."

"Can you tell if the others are working right now?"

"Paul and Corabeth are. It feels like G is in his element, but he's not doing anything active. I think his magic is mostly like that, really still and quiet."

"Well, since we're almost done here, we might end up being the first ones home. I only know how to cook about three things, but maybe if I can get some help, we might be able to put together a nice dinner for everyone."

"I won't mind helping you, but I've never really cooked anything before."

"Zanner, the spell looks good. Go ahead." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

Agent Roberts and Dex fell silent and waited as Zanner quietly muttered, "Here it goes."

* * * * *

As expected, the part of the protectorate that they were attempting to influence was far enough away that nothing visibly happened.

"Very good. You did that expertly, Zanner."

"Are we done now?" Zanner asked hopefully.

"We will be once we have the protectorate folded away into its own dimension."

"We'll be back tomorrow, won't we? Why can't we leave it like it is? It's invisible and the archway is closed." Zanner asked curiously.

"Although we *could* do that, it wouldn't be right. We need to leave the protectorate as well defended as we possibly can just in case other priorities surface and we can't return as soon as we would like."

"Mr. Hansen's right. Even though it's not likely that anyone will go into your house while you're at the corner store, it would be foolish not to lock the door for the short time that you'll be away." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Are you saying that you don't trust people?" Mr. Hansen asked with a weary grin.

"FBI." Agent Roberts responded simply.

Mr. Hansen and the boys laughed at his deadpan response.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts could tell that all three were exhausted and wished that there was something more that he could do to help them.

"Would it help you if you undid the spell you put on the druids? Would that give you extra magic to work with?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"It wouldn't make any difference. Now that they've been given access to the divine power, they no longer need us to augment them. They just needed a little boost to give them access to the magic that was there waiting to be used."

"Does this mean that humans can access magic like witches do?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"That's difficult to explain. The short answer is 'yes', but it takes not only a lot of hard work and dedication, but also some degree of luck. In most cases, a human will need to have been blessed,

cursed or otherwise imbued with a magical gift that will open the door for them."

"Okay. Well, how about the amulet that the kids made for me? Would that be enough to give me access to magic?"

"That's the other thing that makes working with magic so unpredictable. My first instinct is to say that it wouldn't be possible, but the magic works in its own way and sometimes appears to have its own will."

"I was just asking because the thing with the amulet might have opened the door to what happened when I got my shadow back."

"There may be some relation, but then again, there may not. Things like this sometimes just happen. To be honest, I don't know much about shadowmancy. "

"Is there anyone who *would* know? I'd like to learn as much as possible so I don't end up accidentally hurting someone with my shadow."

"Professor Everstone is well versed in many of the more obscure magics. It's possible that he might know something."

"I'll be sure to remember to ask him"

"Mr. Hansen?" Zanner quietly interrupted.

"When you're ready to fold the protectorate, do you think that I could join with the earth element and watch what you do?"

"Yes. I think that after all that you've done today that you should be able to follow along with a more complex spelling."

"Thanks. I know that it's way too big for me to be able to do, but I'd like to see how it works."

"I'm glad to see that you're interested. In fact, I think that I've had enough rest. Why don't we do it right now?"

"Okay!" Zanner said happily.

"I'm going to stand with Archdruid Highley's followers, just to be sure that they stay out of the way." Agent Roberts said professionally.

"Thank you. I appreciate that." Mr. Hansen said gratefully before turning to face the protectorate.

* * * * *

"They're about to fold space. You might want to keep everyone back." Agent Roberts said as he approached Milo and Jen.

"They're about to do it! Everyone hold on! It's about to get really windy!" Milo called out.

"Back up a little and be sure to brace yourselves." Jen said firmly.

Archdruid Highley and his brothers were working to prepare people for the impending gale.

Agent Roberts looked toward the protectorate for a moment, taking in the sight of the alien landscape.

On impulse, he carefully took hold of the necklace he was wearing and slowly lifted it off.

As soon as the necklace had been removed, Agent Roberts saw the landscape before him drastically change. The 'mirage' looked like several small groves of trees. It didn't bear any resemblance to either the open grassy field or the alien landscape of the protectorate.

As he put the necklace back on, he saw the landscape change back to the bizarre sandy crystalline spectacle that it had been before.

"Agent Roberts! Your shadow!" Milo screeched.

As he turned, he saw his shadow engulfing Milo, already up to his shoulders.

"Shadow. Think very carefully about what you're doing. If you hurt Milo, I may be forced to do something that I really don't want to do."

There was a long silent moment as Agent Roberts waited to see what was going to happen next.

"It's not hurting me... I think maybe that it's trying to protect me." Milo said uncertainly.

"Let me know if he does anything that you don't want and I'll move away."

"It's okay so far. It's just holding me."

Although Agent Roberts didn't have any *empathic* sense to speak of, he nonetheless surmised that Shadow was somehow letting Milo know that he wouldn't cause him harm.

A sudden gust of wind caught Agent Roberts' by surprise and he turned his attention back toward the protectorate.

There were sounds of struggle behind him as the congregation fought to maintain their footing.

"Are you alright?" Agent Roberts called out, knowing that Milo was the only one who could possibly hear him over the howling wind.

"Your shadow is keeping me anchored. I'm fine." Milo responded.

There was a momentary stillness and silence, then the wind began to howl in earnest.

Agent Roberts instinctively crouched down to try and minimize the impact of the wind on him, then glanced back at Milo to assess his situation.

Although the light was meager, Agent Roberts could see that Milo was still standing upright and was cocooned in darkness.

By all appearances, he wasn't struggling against the wind or the shadow.

Agent Roberts turned his attention forward in time to see the entire protectorate twist out of their reality.

As the wind subsided, all that was left to see in the dim twilight was a wholly unremarkable grassy field.

"How are you doing, Milo?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"That was amazing. Thank you for doing that."

"Hey, it wasn't me. Shadow wanted to protect you and keep you safe."

"Thank you Shadow." Milo said sincerely, then added more quietly, "I'm sorry that I hurt you."

The shadow surrounding Milo lingered for a moment, then began to recede.

"I need to go check on Dag and the boys. Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I'm great." Milo assured him.

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts approached, he became concerned.

"Is he hurt?" Agent Roberts asked as he knelt at Mr. Hansen's side.

"He's just resting for a few minutes. Doing the space folding spell wore him out." Zanner quietly explained.

"Would you mind making some light for me? I'd like to check him over, just to be sure."

"Yeah. No problem." Zanner quickly said as he rushed to perform the gestures of the spell.

Whether it was from his haste or perhaps his connection to the earth through Dex, the cloud of fairy lights that Zanner created encompassed the entire gathering of people as well as a significant part of the grassy field.

It stood out to him that while everyone else was looking around in awe, Milo seemed to be suddenly anxious.

A murmur of oohs and ahhs rose up from the congregation.

Agent Roberts carefully examined Mr. Hansen for any outward signs of injury.

In the end he finally determined that Zanner was probably right. Mr. Hansen was asleep due to exhaustion. Just as he was about to say as much, Mr. Hansen opened his eyes and looked around blearily.

"How are you doing, Dag?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"I think I'm alright. That just took a little more out of me than I expected."

"Do you need anything?"

"For this day to end."

"I'm working on it. Do you need a few more minutes to rest before we go?"

"No. I think I can manage."

"Did everything go alright with the space fold?"

"Yes." Mr. Hansen said, then turned his head slightly and asked, "Zanner? Could you tell if all the spatial primacies were sealed?"

"Yes. You got them all and even finished double-checking them before you faded out." Zanner said confidently.

"Good. Things got a little fuzzy there at the end so I couldn't be sure."

"It's completely closed and stable." Zanner assured him.

Mr. Hansen slowly forced himself into a sitting position, then stopped for a moment to recover from the effort.

A strange sound drew Agent Roberts attention and he looked back to see Archdruid Highley gleefully laughing, surrounded by his brothers and their followers.

"Do you think that we're going to have to worry about some of these people telling about what they saw?" Dex asked quietly.

"I think that we're going to worry about it, whether we want to or not. But there's not much we can do about it either way."

"Can't Jen do something with her mind control magic?" Dex asked curiously.

"Possibly. I don't have enough of a sense of her ability to speculate." Mr. Hansen said, then worked to achieve a standing position.

Agent Roberts and both boys did their best to help him to stand.

"Are you going to be able to make it back to the car?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"I believe so. Although I may need to go slowly when we have to climb."

"I don't think that will be a problem. None of us are feeling very zippy at the moment."

"I feel like I could sleep for a week." Zanner said as the group started slowly walking toward the path that they had arrived on.

"We brought you here today to act as an earth mage. You performed flawlessly in both planning and execution. What you've gotten is a taste of what lies ahead of you, should you choose to follow this path."

"Are you leaving?" Archdruid Highley interrupted as he approached.

"These guys have had a hard day and they need to rest."

"I just thought you might want to stay for a while, it's turning into something of a celebration."

"Thank you but no." Mr. Hansen said simply

"We'll see you tomorrow. I need to get these guys home." Agent Roberts added.

"What can we expect tomorrow?" Archdruid Highley asked curiously.

"We're going to need to check in with the other teams before we can formulate a plan for the next phase." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

"From the way it looks to me, you're already set up with everything you need. If we don't come back at all, the protectorate will be just fine." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"Then why are you coming back?"

"There may be some things that we can do to make the protectorate more secure or more enduring. The barrier is adequate for today. Next we will attempt to make it adequate for tomorrow." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"Which we will discuss in more detail after these guys have had some rest." Agent Roberts said firmly.

Archdruid Highley looked at Mr. Hansen and the boys, before saying more quietly, "Be sure to take as much time as you need. A lot of people are going to be counting on you."

"I'll take good care of them." Agent Roberts said in the tone of a vow.

"Of that I am sure." Archdruid Highley said warmly, then turned to go back to his followers and his brothers.

* * * * *

The trek back to the cars seemed to take a disproportionately long time.

When they finally arrived, Agent Roberts thought to ask, "Are you going to be alright to drive?"

"I should be okay, although I would appreciate it if the boys could go with me to help keep me from drifting off."

"Can you handle that, guys?" Agent Roberts asked seriously.

"Yeah. Don't worry about us. We'll keep him awake." Zanner assured him.

"If you say that you've got this, I'll trust you."

"Thanks." Zanner said sincerely.

* * * * *

The drive home was slow and anxious as Agent Roberts kept careful watch on the car following him.

When they finally arrived back at the house, Agent Roberts felt that he had been relieved of a great weight.

The boys helped Mr. Hansen to the front door as Agent Roberts opened it for them.

"Dag, would you like to stay down here until after dinner or would you rather go up to your room for a while?"

"I want to be present when it's time to discuss what's to be done next. Perhaps I could lie down for a bit, until the others have arrived."

"That sounds like a plan. We'll see to it that you're up before anything is discussed." Agent Roberts quickly agreed, then said to the boys, "Why don't you help Mr. Hansen upstairs and see that he's comfortable while I start dinner?"

"Sure thing. You can count on us." Zanner assured him before leading Mr. Hansen away.

Chapter 33

"Shelly? Do you have a few minutes to help me out with something?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"*What's wrong? You sound like you're in a panic. Are you in trouble?*"

"No. Well, yes. Sort of. I've got to make dinner for about a dozen people and I have no idea what I'm doing. Can you help me out?"

"*I'm not a great cook, but I'll do what I can. Tell me what you're making and I'll see what I can do for you.*"

"I thought that I'd make meat and potatoes, but the cookbook is telling me to 'braze' and 'sear' and I'm supposed to have something called 'fond' and I don't even know if that's a spice or a vegetable or what."

"*What have you done so far?*"

"I opened the cookbook to get an idea of what I'd have to do, then I called you."

"*Good. At least we won't have to try and salvage something that's already been messed up. Have you turned on the oven yet?*"

"No. But I know how to do that!"

"*Calm down. Breathe. Now turn on the oven and set it to 350. It's going to need time to heat up.*"

"Okay. I've got that."

"*Good. Now, tell me, what kind of meat are we cooking?*"

"Beef, I think... I'm pretty sure."

"*What does the label say?*"

"It doesn't have one. It's wrapped in white paper and tied with string. There's some writing on the outside, but I don't know what it means, it's something like 'ZZG'."

"*Okay. No problem. We can still make this work. How big is the piece of meat?*"

"It's about the size of a newborn baby."

"*How many pounds would you estimate?*

"I don't know... about six maybe?"

"*I hope you aren't planning on serving dinner anytime soon. That's going to take some time to cook.*"

"No. It's going to be a while before everyone gets here."

"*Even so, we need to get your meat braised and into the oven right away.*"

"There's that word again. I don't know what that means."

"*Don't worry, I'll talk you through it. Do you have any flour?*"

"Yes. I've got some right here!"

"*I need for you to put some flour into a large shallow pan, big enough to hold the piece of meat. Don't use your baking pan, you're going to need that when you finish with this part.*"

"Okay, I know what a pizza pan looks like, but I'm a little fuzzy on what I'm working with here. Which pan would be best to use for baking?"

"*What would be **ideal** is a granite roaster, but if you don't have one of those, any pan with a lid that's big enough and can be used in the oven should be fine.*"

"There's nothing here made of granite, they're all metal..."

"*That's just a name. A granite roaster is dark blue, almost black, and it has white specks. It's shaped like an oval and has a matching lid.*"

"I don't think that I have anything like that but there's a really big cast iron kettle with a lid. That would probably be big enough to hold it."

"*Cast iron? Actually, that could work really well. Before you do anything else, you need to wipe out the cast iron kettle and make sure that it's clean. Once you've done that, smear shortening all around the inside of it.*"

"Shortening?"

"*Yeah. Like Crisco. Do you have anything like that?*"

"I don't think so. But to be honest, I don't know what I'd do with it if I had it."

"*We don't have time for me to explain. Do you have any kind of oil?*"

"Yes. Conrad told me to buy some vegetable oil."

"*Good. Pour a little bit of that into the cast iron pan and swish it around. Once the bottom of the pan is completely coated, pour out whatever's left.*"

"Okay. I don't understand why you want me to, but I'll do it."

"*Trust me. This is going to help us later. Go ahead and do that, then put the pan in the oven... I'll wait.*"

* * * * *

"Okay. It's in the oven. What now?"

"*Do you have some kind of a pan or dish that you can put the meat on while you coat it with flour?*"

"Is it okay if I use the pizza pan?"

"*Sure. Stick with what you know. Just dump the flour on the pan... you'll need enough to coat the roast. Probably about a cup.*"

"Okay. I got that. What now?"

"*I think we'll keep it simple. Sprinkle some salt and pepper into the flour, then mix it to distribute it throughout the flour.*"

"Okay. I've done that."

"*Good. Then the next step is to coat the roast. Put it on the pizza pan and rub the flour into every surface. Make sure to flip it over and coat the bottom too.*"

"Okay. Be right back."

"*I'll be right here. Take all the time you need.*"

* * * * *

"It's completely coated with flour. What next?"

"*Get some potholders or a towel and take the cast iron pan out of the oven and put it on the stovetop. Turn the burner on under the pan and set it to medium high.*"

"Okay. Got it."

"*Good. Then put about a quarter cup of oil in the pan. Once that's done, move the meat into the cast iron and hopefully it'll be hot enough to sizzle.*"

A moment later, Michelle could hear the frying sound in the background.

"*Now you'll need to keep turning the meat until you've browned it on all sides.*"

"Yeah. Just a minute."

"*Go as slow as you need to, Just make sure it's browned all over*."

* * * * *

"Okay. That's done. What now?"

"*Move the pan off the heat."* She said immediately, then asked, *"Do you have any cloves?*"

"I don't know what that is."

"*It's a spice.*"

"Conrad picked out some spices for me, but I don't know what he got."

"*Look for cloves and bay leaves. If you've got those, we'll be okay.*"

"I'm looking now... yeah. I've got both of those."

"*Good. Take eight cloves and press them into the surface of the roast, cut it if you have to. After you've done that, drop three bay leaves into the pan.*"

"This seems so weird to me, like I'm performing some kind of pagan ritual."

"*If you think that now, just wait until it's finished. That's when you'll really get to see the magic.*"

"Okay. That's done. What's next?"

"*Listen, I have some things that I have to work on tonight so I won't be able to hold your hand through this whole thing. The hard part's done, so I'm going to give you the instructions for the rest so that you can finish it off yourself.*"

"Thanks for doing this Shell, I really appreciate it."

"*Do you have any onions?*"

"Yes."

"*You'll need about two medium or three small. Peel them and slice them thinly. Scatter the onions overtop of the roast, then add about half a cup of red wine...*"

"I don't have any wine."

"*Do you have vinegar?*"

"Yes. Conrad told me to buy that."

"*Add half a cup of vinegar, then about the same amount of water. Put the lid on and put that into the oven.*"

"Before you go, can you tell me how to make some potatoes to go with it?"

"*I'm getting there. Peel about six or eight potatoes and cut them into bite-sized chunks. Peel three or four carrots and cut them to about the same size. In about an hour and a half, put the carrots and potatoes into the pan with the roast, then let it cook for at least another hour.*"

"Yeah. Okay. I can do that."

"*When the time is up, test one of the larger pieces of potato to be sure that it's fully cooked. If it's not, give it another fifteen minutes, then check again.*"

"Okay. Yeah."

"*Be sure to call me and let me know how it turns out.*"

"I'll do that. Thanks Shell, you're a lifesaver."

"*It's just good to know that you aren't 'perfect' at everything. There are still a few things that your little sister can do to help you.*"

"I wish we lived closer together. I miss you."

"*I miss you too. But we both have things that we have to do.*"

"I know."

"*Listen, I've got to get going. Get that roast into the oven as quickly as you can or your guests won't be able to eat before midnight.*"

"Thanks again. I'll talk to you later."

"*Bye.*"

"Bye."

* * * * *

"Whatever you're cooking smells really good." Zanner said as he led the way into the kitchen.

"Do you need any help?" Dex asked as he looked around at the disheveled kitchen.

"I just need to peel some potatoes and carrots, but it'll be awhile before I need them." Agent Roberts said as he opened drawers, obviously looking for something.

"I can do the potatoes while you clean up." Dex cautiously volunteered.

"Yeah. It looks like your kitchen kinda exploded." Zanner added.

Before Agent Roberts could respond, Dex asked, "Did you need this burner turned on for some reason?"

"No. I guess not. Shelly just never told me to turn it off."

"Who's Shelly?"

"My sister. I called to ask her advice on making dinner." Agent Roberts said as he turned off the burner.

"How did you want the potatoes done?" Dex asked curiously.

"Peeled and cut into bite-sized chunks."

"Are you making mashed potatoes?"

"No. They're going to be cooked in with the roast."

"That sounds good. Don't worry about the potatoes and carrots. They'll be ready when you need them."

"How's Mr. Hansen doing?"

"We talked to him about the protectorate for a couple minutes, then he fell asleep."

"How about you guys? Do you need some rest after what you've just gone through?"

"I think we both need to do something that's low stakes and not magic related for a little bit." Zanner said frankly.

Dex nodded his wholehearted agreement.

"I suppose that after all the excitement it's good to get back to your routine." Agent Roberts said slowly, then thought to add, "I wonder how the other groups are doing."

Dex put down his paring knife and closed his eyes for a moment.

"I didn't mean for you to check on them. I know you're tired." Agent Roberts protested.

"It's no more trouble for me than looking out the window." Dex said simply, then looked up and added, "Both groups are still working."

"Well, then let's make sure that they have a good meal waiting for them when they get home."

"So are we just having roast and potatoes?" Zanner asked from the sink, where he was drawing a pan of water.

"Is that not enough?"

"I don't know. But I was asking in case there's something else that we need to start working on before it's too late."

"Conrad had me get some vegetables, but I don't know if there's anything I can do with them. I mean, I don't know if they'd go with this meal."

"What kind of vegetables?"

"I don't know. He pointed at stuff and I bought it. Look in the drawer in the refrigerator and see if there's anything you can work with."

"Dex, have you got this?" Zanner asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Go ahead."

* * * * *

"It sounds like someone just pulled up out front." Zanner announced from the island where he was cleaning radishes.

"I'll get it." Agent Roberts said as he quickly dried his hands on a dish towel, then thought to ask, "If I get tied up, will you add the potatoes and carrots to the roast in about ten minutes?"

"Don't worry. We'll take care of it." Dex assured him.

As Agent Roberts hurried out of the kitchen, Zanner cautiously asked, "Do you want to try the dressing that I made?"

"Is it as sweet as the last one?"

"No. I think I figured out the problem. I must have confused teaspoons and tablespoons when I was reading the recipe. This one's better. I promise."

"Okay. I'll try it."

* * * * *

"How are you guys doing?" Agent Roberts asked as he hurried out the front door.

"G fell asleep on the ride back. He really wore himself out." Miss Oaken said as she slowly got out of the car.

"How did the barrier work go?"

"G and Corabeth were both amazing. They came up with some really ingenious improvements for the barrier."

"I woke him up." Corabeth said as she got out of the passenger's side of the car.

"So what's the plan? Are we going to regroup here, then go into town for dinner?"

"Dinner's in the oven. It still needs to cook for a little while, but that works out since we're waiting on the other team."

"Where's Mr. Hansen?" Corabeth asked as she looked toward the house.

"From the way it looked to me, unfolding and refolding space took everything that he had to give. He's taking a little nap before dinner, but he made me promise that we'd wake him before we discussed the barriers."

"I think that all of us could use some time to reflect on the events of the day before we start comparing notes. It might help us to identify the most important points, so we can discuss those first."

"G fell back to sleep." Corabeth said as she leaned down to look into the back seat.

"Wake him up so we can get him inside." Miss Oaken said with a slight smile.

"Don't bother. I'll carry him in." Agent Roberts said as he walked to the car.

"You don't have to..." Miss Oaken began to say, but trailed off as she realized that Agent Roberts was going to do it regardless.

* * * * *

Although it was an uncomfortable angle, Agent Roberts was able to scoop the sleeping teenager into his arms and lift him out of the back seat of the car.

"I'll get the door for you." Corabeth said quickly as she rushed ahead.

"Thank you." Agent Roberts said quietly, then smiled as G shifted slightly in his arms to snuggle.

"I'll put him in my room and we'll wake him up when dinner's ready."

"Is there anything we can do to help with dinner?" Miss Oaken asked hopefully.

"I think everything's under control. Why don't you two take some time to get comfortable and relax?" Agent Roberts asked as he continued on through the living room.

"Yes. That *does* sound nice." Miss Oaken said contentedly.

"Do you need anymore doors opened?" Corabeth asked cautiously.

"Nope. I've got it from here." Agent Roberts said as he carried G into the hallway.

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts placed G on his bed, he noticed that the boy was still fully dressed for hiking. Although he wasn't wearing a backpack, he still had a coat and hiking boots on.

He moved slowly and deliberately to get G's coat off, then just as carefully took off his boots.

Once all of that was done, Agent Roberts took the spare blanket from the foot of the bed and gently covered G, so that he wouldn't get chilled as he slept.

G's response was to gather the blanket around him as he turned onto his side.

Agent Roberts smiled at the move, then quietly left the room, gently closing the door behind him.

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts entered the living room, he found it empty. Supposing that Corabeth and Miss Oaken had gone upstairs to change, he continued on to the kitchen where he found Dex and Zanner working together to add the vegetables to the roast.

He stood and watched silently as the boys worked to complete their appointed task.

As soon as the boys were done, Agent Roberts said, "Thanks for taking care of that for me."

"Is everything alright?" Zanner asked curiously.

"It looks like G completely wore himself out, he's asleep in my room right now. Miss Oaken and Corabeth are relaxing for a few minutes after their long day."

"Why aren't we doing that?" Zanner asked with a grin.

"Because we'd rather do for others than do for ourselves." Dex said frankly.

"Yeah. I guess that's true." Zanner reluctantly admitted.

"I appreciate all that you guys have done to help, but if you'd like to rest for a while, there's really not much left to do."

After a long silent moment, Dex finally said, "I think that I'd be able to relax a lot better if I knew that all the dishes were done."

"You're weird." Zannner said with a look askance at Dex.

"If we don't do the dishes now, there's just going to be that many more to face when we're done eating."

"I guess so." Zanner reluctantly agreed.

"Excuse me, but you're both my guests. You don't have to do any dishes at all." Agent Roberts informed them.

"You cooked. Someone else gets to do the dishes. It's only fair." Zanner said firmly.

"As nice as that sounds, I'm pretty sure that it doesn't work that way. I'm the host, you're the guest, that's all there is to it. Go take a break."

"Nope. We're doing this. Deal with it." Zanner said With a cheeky grin.

Before Agent Roberts could react to that, Dex timidly asked, "Do you know if you have enough plates and silverware for everyone?"

Agent Roberts eyes went wide at the question. Rather than answer he hurried to the nearest cupboard to explore what treasures it might hold.

"Good call." Zanner said quietly to Dex as he began to run water in the sink.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts was contemplating calling Gil and Nancy to see if they could loan him some dishes when he walked into the dining room and spotted the china cabinet.

Upon investigation, he found that the cabinet not only had china plates and crystal but also drawers full of silverware, including various serving utensils.

Feeling a wave of relief wash over him, he started to collect the dishes, determined to give them a thorough washing.

Although he was no expert on the matter, he suspected that the silverware might be *actual* silver, mainly due to the dull color.

He didn't know if he had what he might need to polish the silver or if, indeed, he had the time to do so. But he supposed that in the worst case scenario that his guests might be forced to eat off tarnished silverware.

All things considered, he doubted that anyone would mind too much... with the possible exception of Mr. Bentley Brown. He had no problem at all with accepting that possibility.

* * * * *

"Look what *I* found." Agent Roberts said as he carried the first stack of dishes into the kitchen.

"Wow. Those look like the dishes my mom keeps put away for when we have special people come over." Zanner said frankly, then cautiously added, "But I don't think we've had anyone special enough so far because I don't think we've ever actually used them."

"I'm sure that these dishes are probably very precious to the Spencer family, who own this house, so we need to be sure to be very careful with them. But dishes exist to be used. They have no real value and serve no purpose if they're only ever kept up on a shelf."

"I guess since you're bringing those in here you want for us to wash them for you." Zanner guessed.

"They need to be rinsed off, but if you don't feel like doing it, I can do it myself." Agent Roberts said simply as he set the plates beside the sink.

"Did you find any silverware?" Dex asked curiously.

"Yes. Although I'm going to have to see if I can find some silver polish. The silver looks like it hasn't been used for a few decades." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Before you do that, let me try a few things. I've got a few cleaning spells that I've never really used that much. One of them might work."

"You don't need to bother. Silver is a basic element of the earth." Dex said from his place at the sink. "There's only a few 'tricks' that I can do as an Oriad, but dismissing tarnish and restoring luster to earth metals is one of them."

"Is it something that you can do without making yourself too tired?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"It doesn't take any energy at all. I just join with the earth and the silver is restored. I actually have to fight *not* to remove tarnish and patina."

"Oh. Alright then. If you guys don't mind, I'll just bring in all the silver and crystal that we'll be using for dinner and once it's washed, I'll set the table."

"Sounds good to me. Does that work for you?" Zanner asked Dex curiously.

"Yes. As soon as we have all the silver in one place, I'll restore it before we wash it."

* * * * *

The sound of the front door opening drew Agent Roberts' attention as he was placing dinnerware on the dining room table.

He hurried into the living room in time to see Professor Everstone, Paul, Filipe and Mr. Bentley Brown wearily making their way into the living room.

"How did everything go?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"I was not sufficiently prepared for the levels of power necessary for the task." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"Was there a problem?"

"We were able to complete the required modifications, however had I known the complexity of the spells that we would be using I would have requested additional personnel." Professor Everstone said as he walked past Agent Roberts to one of the large overstuffed chairs.

"So does that mean that you're all exhausted?" Agent Roberts guessed as he took a seat on the couch that was opposite.

"In a manner of speaking. While we are capable of channeling the magic present in the world around us, each of us also carry our own magical reserve. In the course of today's events, I believe that each of us has exhausted our personal reservoir of magic. I can't really think of an equivalent sensation to describe it to you, but suffice it to say that it is something more than feeling tired." Professor Everstone said wearily.

"It's like having sex so much that you've run out of cum." Paul said, obviously straining from the effort of even doing that much.

"Yeah. We're all shooting dust." Filipe said with a weary pained smile.

"Please tell me that the wonderful aroma coming from the kitchen isn't just a product of my wishful thinking." Professor Everstone said, not dignifying the boys' example with a response.

"Yeah. There's a roast in the oven. It should be ready in about half an hour. If you feel like cleaning up or getting changed or anything, you've got plenty of time to do it." Agent Roberts said with concern.

"Bathroom." Paul said immediately as he forced himself off the couch.

* * * * *

As soon as Paul was out of the room, Filipe quietly said, "I'm worried about Paul. There were a couple times today that I thought we were going to lose him."

"How do you mean?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"He put so much of himself into the spell that he went into his demon form."

"I thought that was normal for him."

"Yeah. But just for a few seconds, I think Paul kinda disappeared. He went *beyond* his demon form. What took his place... I don't think it was Paul at all." Filipe said anxiously.

Agent Roberts looked to Professor Everstone to see if he had an explanation.

The professor seemed to be deep in thought, either pondering possibilities or considering what was proper to reveal.

Finally Professor Everstone quietly said, "Most of us have an affinity for one of the primary elements, but we also have a lesser potential with other elements. It's not uncommon for someone powerful in fire to be able to enact a minor wind spell to augment his ability."

"So let me guess, Paul has elemental affinities in both fire and water, right?" Agent Roberts guessed.

"Yes, which in itself is unusual, since fire and water run in direct opposition to each other." Professor Everstone said seriously.

"Can I guess who you're talking about?" Paul asked as he walked back into the living room.

"I was attempting to explain your situation for Agent Roberts' benefit." Professor Everstone said simply.

"Yeah. Thanks. I guess I'm just a little on edge about the whole thing. I didn't know anything about it until today." Paul said frankly.

"You didn't know about your elemental affinity?" Agent Roberts asked to confirm his understanding.

"I was told that my thing was fire and I was put into Wizardry classes to learn more about how to use it. Even though I could make some of the basic water spells work, there was never any reason for me to try and do more with them." Paul said honestly.

"Part of the fault is the school's policy for dealing with such things. Every student is only told about their primary affinity. Those with a secondary affinity are typically told only after they have achieved a certain level of mastery of their primary." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"So you knew about my water ability before all this started?"

"Yes. Of course. Although at the time I had been working under the assumption that the barrier would be entirely earth based. In such a circumstance, you would not have had occasion to use your water affinity except in support of Dex and Zanner as they performed the bulk of the modifications to the barrier."

"What does this have to do with something going wrong when Paul went 'full power'?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"I'm only speculating, but it appears that Paul naturally maintains a balance of fire and water magic within him. When he expended all his water magic, his fire magic filled the void. It would seem that

his fire magic is tied directly into the demonic aspect of his heritage." Professor Everstone said simply.

"If Paul spent all his water magic and he naturally keeps a balance, does that mean that he needs to use some fire power to even things back out?" Agent Roberts ventured.

"Not necessarily. Things left as they are should normalize without our intervention. However, the time may come when Paul will be required to expend some fire magic to keep the imbalance from becoming too pronounced."

"Actually, if you don't mind, I'd really like to do a quick summoning. It'll take the edge off my fire and I wouldn't mind spending some time with Mah Zah and Ginh Zah." Paul said hopefully.

"As long as Agent Roberts has no objection, I certainly don't mind." Professor Everstone said easily.

"I don't mind at all." Agent Roberts assured them.

Unlike most times that Agent Roberts witnessed magic being performed, Paul didn't do anything more than glance at the floor beside the couch where he sat.

A glowing spell diagram appeared on the floor and a moment later a smudge of darkness formed in the center.

As had happened before, a kitten and puppy emerged from the dark blur and looked around curiously.

"We've finished our work for the day and I just wanted to check in with you." Paul told them simply.

The kitten chittered and meowed for a moment, then walked to Paul and began to climb up his leg.

The puppy barked once as she stayed in place.

"I don't know." Paul told the puppy, then looked to Agent Roberts and asked, "Where's G?"

"He fell asleep on the way back from the barrier site. So when they got here, I carried him into my room and he's asleep on my bed." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Where's your room? Ginh Zah wants to check on G and make sure that he's okay." Paul asked as he cuddled the kitten against his chest.

"It's down the hallway, the first door on the left..." Agent Roberts began to say as the puppy hurried toward the hallway.

Agent Roberts stood as he said, "The door's closed. I'd better get it for him."

"Don't worry. Ginh Zah can get it herself." Paul assured him, then added, "In fact, Ginh Zah could rip the door off its hinges if she wanted to."

"Good to know." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"Agent Roberts? I think it's time. Do you want to check on the roast?" Zanner called from the kitchen doorway before Agent Roberts could retake his seat.

"Yes. I'll be right there." Agent Roberts said as he started toward the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Do you guys want to help me?" Agent Roberts asked as he entered the kitchen.

"What do you want us to do?" Zanner asked curiously.

"Shelly told me to taste one of the larger potatoes to be sure that it was completely cooked. I figure that if we each take one and try it, then we can be reasonably sure that they're all done."

"That sounds great! I'm starving!" Zanner said enthusiastically.

Agent Roberts opened the oven, then used potholders to lift the large heavy cast iron pan.

As soon as it was on the stove top, he carefully used a potholder to lift off the lid.

"That smells AWESOME!" Zanner said with a grand smile.

"Let's just hope that it tastes as good as it smells." Agent Roberts said as he stepped away enough to retrieve three forks from the silverware drawer.

He handed out the forks, then targeted his pick for the largest chunk of potato on display.

The boys each speared a potato chunk, then all three blew on their pieces of potato, in hopes of making them cool enough so as not to cause injury when they were eaten.

Agent Roberts was the first to attempt to eat his potato, but the boys were only a moment behind.

After a considering pause, Zanner said around a mouthful of potato, "Salt."

"Yeah. Seriously." Dex confirmed.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but agree. He took the salt shaker from beside the stove and began to vigorously shake it over the roast and potatoes.

"How are they as far as being done?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Fine. They seem to be cooked all the way through. They're just seriously bland." Zanner said frankly.

"Give me a second." Agent Roberts said as he retrieved a large slotted spoon, then began to stir the potatoes and carrots, to mix the salt into the rest of the dish.

"Did you make gravy for it?" Zanner asked as he watched.

"No. It did that all by itself." Agent Roberts said, then asked, "Are you ready to try another one?"

"Yeah. I want to get one with some gravy on it." Zanner said as he immediately went for his potato chunk of choice.

Dex moved more slowly, but also chose a potato with gravy.

Agent Roberts selected a sufficiently large chunk of potato and once again slowly blew on it.

"Oh man! That's good!" Zanner said appreciatively, once again past a mouthful of potato.

"I think dinner is ready." Dex confirmed.

"Okay. Would you guys go and get Mr. Hansen and Miss Oaken? I'll go get G and then we'll eat.

"Yep! We're on it!" Zanner said immediately, then hurried out of the room with Dex following a step behind.

Agent Roberts put the lid back on the cast iron pan before leaving to wake G.

Chapter 34

Agent Roberts stopped in the doorway and smiled at the sight of the puppy curled into a ball at G's side.

Ginh Zah immediately looked at Agent Roberts suspiciously, as if evaluating his status as a potential threat.

"Dinner's ready. G needs to wake up so that he can eat." Agent Roberts gently explained.

After a moment to consider, Ginh Zah moved from G's side up to the pillow, then proceeded to lick his face.

G's eyes suddenly opened and he automatically backed away from the licking assault. After a moment to realize his situation, he wrinkled his nose as he muttered, "Demon breath."

Agent Roberts smiled, then gently said, "Dinner's ready. I thought you'd probably be hungry."

"Um... yeah. Thanks." G said as he surveyed his surroundings.

"You fell asleep on the way home so I carried you inside so that you could get some rest."

"Oh, okay. Sorry you had to do that." G said as he forced himself into a sitting position.

"Don't worry about it. I didn't mind at all." Agent Roberts assured him, then added, "Come to the dining room when you're ready."

G looked down at the puppy as he said, "Yeah. We'll be there in just a minute."

* * * * *

As people gathered in the dining room, they began to quietly speculate on what was keeping their host.

"I assume that Zanner and Dex are helping him, since they're not in here with us." Mr. Hansen said as he looked around.

"Should we go in and offer to help them?" Corabeth asked uncertainly.

"When I talked to Agent Roberts earlier he seemed confident that he had everything under control." Miss Oaken stated simply.

"Well, whatever he's making smells wonderful." Paul interjected.

Everyone fell silent as Zanner and Dex walked into the dining room. Zanner was carrying a covered silver serving dish and Dex was carrying a large bowl of salad.

Agent Roberts followed with an enormous serving platter.

When he placed the platter in the center of the table, he revealed that the roast had already been carved into generous slices.

"That looks awesome!" Paul said excitedly.

From the level of enthusiasm, Agent Roberts wondered just how far Paul was from going 'full demon'. Before he could pursue that line of thought, he thought to ask, "Is everyone here?"

Before anyone could answer, G hurried into the room with a puppy following closely behind.

"Now we are." Paul said happily.

"Good. Dinner is served." Agent Roberts said with a smile.

"Mah Zah, Ginh Zah, it's time for you two to go home and have your own dinner." Paul said seriously.

The puppy barked once in G's direction before hurrying toward Paul.

"Yeah. I'll see you later." G said with a smile.

Agent Roberts noticed the momentary smudge of darkness which whisked Mah Zah and Ginh Zah away.

"This looks wonderful Agent Roberts. On behalf of all of us, I'd like to thank you for taking such good care of us." Professor Everstone said gratefully.

"It's been my pleasure." Agent Roberts assured him, then continued, "We don't stand on ceremony here, go ahead and help yourselves."

Zanner leaned forward to reveal the serving dish filled with potatoes and carrots, swimming in gravy.

"That looks incredible." Mr. Hansen said appreciatively.

"Dig in." Agent Roberts said happily, then began to serve himself from the salad bowl, which was near his plate.

The others around the table began to do the same, each taking what was nearest to them.

"I'm sorry about only having water for you to drink. I don't really have anything else in the house." Agent Roberts said regretfully.

"I don't think any of us would want something to muddy the palate and risk detracting from the pleasure of this meal." Professor Everstone assured him.

"Paul, can you get me some meat?" G asked as he held his plate out.

"Sure." Paul said easily, then skillfully used the serving fork and spoon to maneuver two slices of roast beef onto his plate.

"Make sure that you get some of the gravy with that, it's amazing." Zanner said to G.

"It sure smells awesome." G said as he moved his plate and waited for a turn at the potatoes.

"The dressing on this salad is quite interesting. What is it?" Mr. Bentley Brown asked curiously.

"I have no idea. The boys made that." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"We went through the cookbook and after about a dozen different salad dressing recipes, we finally found one that we had all the ingredients for." Zanner explained.

"It's very... pleasant." Mr. Bentley Brown said simply.

Agent Roberts smiled, feeling fairly certain that that was about as close to a compliment as it was possible to get from Mr. Bentley Brown.

"Agent Roberts, this roast is cooked perfectly and the flavor is incredible." Miss Oaken said appreciatively.

"Yes. If things don't work out for you in the intelligence community for some reason, it's good to know that you have another set of skills to draw upon." Professor Everstone said with a slight smile.

Although Agent Roberts was severely tempted to object and declare his ineptitude, his years of training in managing unexpected situations, allowed him to accept the unearned compliment by graciously saying, "Thank you."

Agent Roberts noticed that Zanner and Dex were watching his reaction carefully, but neither seemed to be inclined to divulge his secret.

"I suppose we can't put it off any longer. We need to discuss what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done." Professor Everstone announced, then prompted, "Mr. Hansen?"

"We had originally intended to install a physical barrier to prevent anyone who would have breached the spatial fold from gaining entry to the protectorate. It turned out that once the space was unfolded that a barrier was already present. After evaluating the newly discovered barrier, Zanner and Dex devised a rather effective camouflage spell that will hide the protectorate, even if the spatial fold were to be completely dismantled for some reason." Mr. Hansen reported seriously.

"What further steps do you feel need to be taken to ensure the safety of the protectorate?"

"We still need to discuss that, but whatever supplementary spells we decide upon would only be to augment what's already in place. As it currently stands, the defense of the protectorate is adequate."

"We also got the druids to do a blessing on the land of the protectorate, making the whole thing into holy ground." Dex added.

"Given what resources you had at your disposal, that was a clever inclusion in the project." Professor Everstone said professionally.

"If anyone needs help with the earth element, just let us know so that we can work it into our schedule for tomorrow. Zanner and Dex should have time to help you out."

"Very good. Excellent work." Professor Everstone said approvingly, then turned and asked, "Miss Oaken?"

"G's primary focus was to augment the existing illusions and expand them to function along the entire perimeter of the barrier. Corabeth has been working to institute a reactive 'Wall of Force' in the airspace above Brynnhollow. While we still have a little detail work to do, what's been done so far has worked perfectly." Miss Oaken reported.

"What do you see as your next step in reinforcing the barrier?" Professor Everstone asked seriously.

"We need to institute Corabeth's 'Wall of Force' at the ground level. While there are still a few details to iron out, that's the primary objective that I'd like for us to tackle next."

"That sounds reasonable." Professor Everstone agreed, then continued, "Paul and Filipe have done an outstanding job fashioning an aerial obfuscation spell to protect the Southseid colony from aircraft and satellite surveillance."

"We used Agent Roberts idea about hiding their shadows and it really worked out great." Paul happily added.

"Once that was done, we began to work on modifying the existing barrier spell to incorporate some of the elements of Corabeth's 'Wall of Force'." Professor Everstone explained.

"Yeah. Speaking of that, when you have a few minutes I'm going to need to ask you some more questions about the spell. So far, what we've come up with isn't anywhere near as effective as yours." Paul told Corabeth seriously.

"Sure. Just let me know when." Corabeth immediately agreed.

Agent Roberts got the sense that Corabeth was enjoying the fact that she was considered an expert in something and that Paul, the new guy who had impressed so many people, was seeking her help.

"Has anyone found new evidence regarding the interconnection of the barriers?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"I could sense all of you through the primary elements. It was almost like you were right there with us." Dex said timidly.

"Yeah, I sensed that too." Paul confirmed.

After a moment to see if anyone else were going to answer, Professor Everstone continued by asking, "Do you have any theory as to what that might mean?"

"They're connected, without a doubt. I can tell by the 'flavor' that the created elements within the barriers are all the same." Paul stated with conviction.

"Yeah. I can't 'taste' as much as Paul does, but I can tell that much about it." Filipe confirmed.

"What about the multilocation thing you were talking about?" Agent Roberts asked Professor Everstone curiously. "Does this help to confirm that?"

"Not in itself. However, it would seem to make it that much more likely." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"Before we go any further, I think you should know that Archdruid Highley took it upon himself to summon his faithful followers to witness the work we were doing on the protectorate." Agent Roberts reluctantly announced.

After a moment to consider, Professor Everstone slowly said, "That's unfortunate."

"They were already there when we got there and there wasn't really anything we could do about it." Zanner anxiously explained.

"I will need to call Mr. Darroch to report this. We aren't equipped to deal with a circumstance such as this." Professor Everstone said gravely.

"What do you think he's going to do?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"He will no doubt dispatch a team to evaluate the situation and take appropriate action."

"Uh oh. That doesn't sound good." Paul said slowly.

"Regardless, we will do what we have to. And if you think this scenario through to its logical conclusion, you will realize that this *is* necessary." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"Yeah. I can see that." Paul reluctantly agreed, then continued by asking, "Would it be okay if I talked to my dad for a minute when you're done?"

"Yes. Of course."

"I'd like to call my dad too... if that's not a problem." Dex timidly added.

"Of course. You're free to call your parents anytime you like." Professor Everstone said sincerely.

"Everyone listen..." Agent Roberts said suddenly, drawing everyone's attention. "Before you start making too many calls, you need to know that the phone service I have here is what's called a

'party line'. That means that any of my neighbors can pick up *their* phone at any time and listen in on your conversations."

"Then maybe it'd be better if we used Facetime or Skype." Dex said consideringly.

"Yes, that would probably work out a lot better..." Agent Roberts said before slyly adding, "Except for the fact that there is **no** internet service in Waxell."

"No internet service? At all? Is that even a thing?" G asked in wonder.

"Cell phones don't work here either. We've already tried." Paul interjected.

"That's right." Agent Roberts confirmed, then continued, "It's okay if you make calls on the landline, just be careful of what you say. You never know who might be listening."

"I knew about the cell phone, but are you saying that there's no internet at all? How do you do... anything?" G muttered in confusion and disbelief.

"Paul, I think G needs you. It looks like the foundations of his world have just been shaken." Agent Roberts said gently.

"Yeah. I got this." Paul said as he draped an arm around G's shoulders.

"Agent Roberts, before we continue, did you happen to notice anything from your unique point of view that should be brought to our attention?" Professor Everstone asked with interest.

"I'm not sure if this is what you're asking about, but there are a few things that I've been curious about."

"What might that be?"

"I was thinking back to when we first assembled this team. You had a series of objectives in mind and chose these people to address

those concerns. My question is, with the way this project has grown beyond its original scope, are we still going to be able to achieve all of our initial goals? Being stretched as thin as we are, are we sacrificing quality on the altar of expediency?"

"The short answer is, 'Yes', if we had unlimited time and unlimited personnel, things would have been handled differently."

"With things being as they are, how likely is it that we will be able to achieve everything that needs to be done?"

"In all honesty, I can't say for certain that we will be able to meet all of our goals. It would be impossible for me to follow behind everyone and check up on them. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. Such is often the case when you trust your teammates to do their jobs." Professor Everstone said professionally.

"I'm sorry Professor. I'm really not trying to accuse you of not being an effective leader. It just occurred to me that with things growing so far out of control that we might have lost sight of our reason for being here in the first place."

"When we assembled the group we were forced to make some assumptions based on previous experience. It turns out that one of those assumptions was that the Southseid barrier spell would be earth based. It turned out to be water based, so adjustments had to be made. Following that, we have adapted the plan as needed to accommodate each new unexpected revelation. Looking at what's left to be accomplished and what we have achieved so far, I believe that we can complete our mission with the personnel and resources at hand."

"Thank you Professor. That's what I wanted to know." Agent Roberts said contentedly.

"Before we conclude, Mr. Bentley Brown, do you have any observations or insights that you would like to contribute to the conversation?" Professor Everstone asked professionally.

Mr. Bentley Brown appeared to be surprised at being asked, but quickly set it aside and said, "My primary focus has been to see that the Third Grail is being used properly and is being protected. So far Paul's use of the relic has been appropriate and I have no criticisms or suggestions. Regarding your greater mission, I would suggest that when you've completed your individual tasks, you reassemble your group and go to each barrier to assess their post-modification conditions. If there were going to be a reaction to the interconnection, it should manifest by that time."

"Yes. That *does* sound like a prudent course of action." Professor Everstone agreed, then looked around the gathering and asked, "Has anyone had to compensate for the interplay amongst the barriers?"

"I could feel the vibrations through the elements, but I didn't have to change anything because of it." Paul said immediately.

"I could feel it too." Dex confirmed.

"By my understanding of such things, an Oriad shouldn't be sensitive to the use of magic." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"I'm only aware of it when it's directly connected to a primary element and I'm not aware of it at all if I'm not actively channeling the earth." Dex explained.

"Even so, it's good to know that your participation is as something more than a conduit." Professor Everstone said honestly.

"But them sensing the connection means that if there was a major disruption in the water element at the Southseid site that it could impact the other two barriers... right?" Agent Roberts asked uncertainly.

"That's the assumption that we're working under." Professor Everstone confirmed.

"We're not doing anything to disrupt the basic elements at the root. We're just adding touches to the existing barrier at the tips of the branches." Paul assured him.

"If no one has anything else to add, I need to make a call to Mr. Darroch before it gets any later." Professor Everstone said as he pushed away from the table.

"Remember that I want to talk to him when you're done." Paul hurried to remind him.

"Yes, yes. I'll let you know as soon as I've finished." Professor Everstone said with a smile.

"Agent Roberts did all the cooking, so who wants to help us with the dishes?" Zanner asked as he stood.

Filipe immediately stood to volunteer. The rest of the kids were less enthusiastic, but nonetheless did their part.

"That was a fantastic meal, Shawn." Mr. Hansen said sincerely.

"Yes. I can't remember the last time I had roast beef that good. It was really exceptional." Miss Oaken said pleasantly.

"I wish I could take credit, but it was really a group effort. Conrad helped me with the shopping, my sister helped me interpret the recipe, Zanner and Dex helped me not only with the preparation, but also with the table, and it's thanks to Dex that the silver actually looks like silver." Agent Roberts explained.

"Well, just in case you had any doubt, everything that all of you did was worth it." Miss Oaken said firmly.

"The meal *was* excellent. Thank you. If you will excuse me." Mr. Bentley Brown said as he stood.

"Yes, of course." Agent Roberts said as he watched the dour man go.

"He seems to have warmed up to us." Mr. Hansen said with a barely restrained grin.

"Not so much to us, but I think Paul's impressed him." Agent Roberts said speculatively.

"Paul's impressed a lot of people." Miss Oaken said frankly, then added, "At the end of his first week at our school, Paul gave a demonstration for all the wizardry students to show what he was capable of."

"I take it that his demonstration went well." Agent Roberts said with a slight smile.

"Paul did a combination of overlapping spells so complex that I doubt any six students working in unison could have achieved the same thing. While none of his individual spells were all that remarkable, the way he combined them and his execution was absolutely brilliant."

"I heard about that. In fact, it was all that anyone could talk about for days afterward." Mr. Hansen added.

"I was there and saw the whole thing. It was every bit as amazing as you've heard." Miss Oaken said honestly, then added, "And if I understood what I was told, that was also the day that Paul was officially adopted by Mr. Darroch."

"With all of that I could easily see a person of Paul's age getting a swelled head and becoming somewhat unbearable. But it seems that he somehow avoided that fate, because he seems perfectly balanced in his approach to the world. He has somehow managed to be both confident and humble regarding his abilities."

Miss Oaken nodded her agreement, then added, "My guess is that his family is supportive of his efforts, but also honest. In my experience, attitude problems can usually be traced back to the home."

"Are you done with your plates?" Filipe asked as he entered the dining room.

"Yes. Thank you." Agent Roberts said as he leaned back in his chair to allow Filipe easier access.

"Do you need for us to leave you your glasses or anything?" Corabeth asked as she approached.

"No. I think we're all done. Thank you for volunteering to help clean up." Miss Oaken said gratefully.

"Yeah. No problem." Corabeth said easily.

"Why don't we move to the living room so that we won't be in their way?" Agent Roberts suggested.

Miss Oaken and Mr. Hansen apparently agreed, since they both stood in unison.

Agent Roberts led the way as he passed Zanner and Dex as they entered the dining room.

* * * * *

When the three adults walked into the living room, they found Professor Everstone talking quietly on the phone.

The others took seats across the room to afford him some measure of privacy.

After a few minutes of silence, Miss Oaken quietly said, "I think it's a really good sign that Corabeth has been included in the cleanup effort. I've been getting the sense that she's been feeling left out."

"Paul and G mentioned something about Corabeth not being as 'all purpose' as the other kids, and that they would do their best to let her know that they appreciated what she *could* do." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Part of that's my fault. In her Wizardry classes I've been encouraging her to focus on developing her unique ability. In doing so, she hasn't diversified her studies to include other useful spells." Miss Oaken said regretfully.

"I think that you must have done the right thing for her or she wouldn't have been included on the team. If they wanted someone more 'well rounded', they would have recruited them."

"I'm just glad that things have worked out the way that they have. Not only has Corabeth been able to make a unique contribution, but she's also been learning to stretch her other abilities and discover new talents."

"It probably doesn't hurt that Paul has acknowledged her ability in front of everyone and asked for her advice." Mr. Hansen added with a grin.

"That alone made the whole trip worth it." Miss Oaken said frankly.

"How is G reacting to being in her shadow?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Actually, he seems to be strangely comfortable with it."

"Maybe that has something to do with him sort of being in Paul's shadow already."

"I really don't think so. I've met G on several occasions the past few years. He's his father's son, without a doubt. G can be assertive when the situation calls for it, but he's also comfortable letting someone else take the lead. I can see that being an incredibly useful character trait in the outside world."

"Excuse me." Professor Everstone said as he put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. "Would one of you go and tell Paul that his father is available to talk to him."

"Yeah. I'll get him." Agent Roberts said immediately.

* * * * *

"Paul, your dad's ready to talk to you." Agent Roberts said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Thanks!" Paul said happily as he dashed out of the room.

Agent Roberts looked around at all the clean dishes stacked everywhere and asked, "How are you guys doing?"

"Paul and Filipe just did the greatest cleaning spell. If my mom knew a spell like that I'd never do dishes by hand again." Dex said frankly.

"Did you ever think that she may already know it and she just makes you do dishes to teach you some kind of lesson about hard work or something?" Zanner asked speculatively.

"That *does* sound like something that she'd do." Dex reluctantly admitted.

"So, if all the dishes are clean, is all that's left to put them away?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Yeah. It took us some time to deal with the leftovers but this is all that's left." Zanner explained.

"The china, crystal and silver all go in the dining room. If you'll help me carry that in, we should be able to get everything put away in a few minutes."

"Just show us where things go." Corabeth said as she carefully picked up some crystal glasses.

* * * * *

Before they had finished putting everything away, Paul had rejoined them and said that everything was going well at home.

"Is it okay if I use your phone for a few minutes?" Dex asked cautiously.

"Sure. There's an extension in the kitchen if you'd like a little privacy while you talk. I think we're just about done in there."

"Yeah. Thanks." Dex responded timidly.

"Just remember that it isn't a secure line. Watch what you say." Agent Roberts cautioned him.

"I'm just going to let them know that I'm okay." Dex said before leaving the dining room.

"Do you know what we're going to be doing tomorrow?" Zanner asked Agent Roberts curiously.

All the other teenagers around the room stopped and listened for the answer with interest.

"No. Professor Everstone hasn't said anything to me about that." Agent Roberts answered, then added, "Let's finish this and go ask him."

The teenagers worked with renewed vigor to put the last few items away.

* * * * *

"Professor, I'm glad we caught you before you turned in for the night. The kids were just wondering if you've decided on what we'll be doing tomorrow." Agent Roberts said as he led the collection of teenagers into the living room.

"Actually, I believe the next logical step should be to evaluate what the needs are at each site and then collectively discuss how best to address those needs." Professor Everstone said frankly.

The kids looked at each other quizzically then, as one might expect, Paul began the discussion. "The big thing left to do at the Southseid site is weaving a 'Wall of Force' enchantment into the existing barrier spell. Even though Filipe and I can probably manage it, I'd feel a whole lot better about it if Corabeth were there. She might be able to see ways that we can make it stronger or more efficient or something."

"Besides that, she might be able to add some kind of 'air' feature to the spell that we aren't able to." Filipe timidly added.

"Zanner, do you have any thoughts about modifications for the protectorate?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"Not really. The space fold should be able to stop anyone trying to get in. If they can somehow get past that, the physical barrier is so powerful that I don't think anyone could break it. But even if they could somehow get through, the entire protectorate is now blessed as 'holy ground'. If any magical being tried to do anything harmful or defile the protectorate, the land is now empowered to defend itself." Zanner said carefully.

"What if a magical being opened it, then let mundane human soldiers in? Would there be anything in place to stop that?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Well, if they somehow managed to do all that, then they'd have to face the nephilim." Zanner said simply.

"Right. Yeah. I can't imagine that ending well for them." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"What about the Brynnhollow barrier? What do we still need to accomplish there?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

Both Miss Oaken and G looked to Corabeth to answer for them.

"We need to add a 'Wall of Force' at the ground level. We've got most of that figured out, but the only problem we're having is trying to find a trigger for it."

"How do you mean?"

"Currently, the defense triggers if the person approaching wasn't invited. Unfortunately, there's nothing in place to defend against aerial drones or remote control ground vehicles infiltrating the area. They could *literally* make it all the way to downtown Brynnhollow without any resistance at all."

"So, if I'm understanding this correctly, the Southseid and the Protectorate barriers are both always on and you enter by way of an exclusion to the usual rule, is that about right?"

"Essentially, yes."

"And what you're trying to do is make Brynnhollow's barrier to be perpetually 'off' and turned on by exception when the wrong person approaches." Agent Roberts slowly continued.

"I think I can see where you're going with this. You think that we should throw up a barrier and allow people to pass through it only when they pass the test..." Mr. Hansen trailed off.

"...instead of only stopping them if they fail." Zanner completed the thought.

"Although the initial construction of such a barrier might be challenging, it still seems to be the most effective way to protect the people of Brynnhollow." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"And we could modify the existing trigger in, like, five minutes." G interjected.

"That sounds good, but is it going to be a problem to set something like that up?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

Corabeth was at a loss for what to say. When she noticed Corabeth floundering, Miss Oaken said, "Without getting into the technical details, the short answer is 'yes'. In fact, there is no practical way that G, Corabeth and I are going to be able to institute a 'Wall of Force' barrier on that scale."

"But..." Agent Roberts said in a leading tone.

"Listen. What I'm about to suggest is dangerous. I'm not saying that we should do it, I'm just throwing it out there for the sake of discussion. While I'm familiar with the theory and I even teach it to my students, I can't say that I've ever heard a reliable account of it ever actually being performed."

"Excuse me, but did she skip the part where she explained what she was talking about or did I blank out for a minute?" Paul asked as he looked around the gathering.

"I believe that Miss Oaken is speaking of the possibility of us conducting a meta-magical manipulation using the entire region as

a spell diagram, the three barrier sites as elemental channels and the magic of the relics to fuel the spell." Professor Everstone said gravely.

"That's insane!" Mr. Hansen immediately barked.

"You'll get no argument from me." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"But..." Agent Roberts said, once again in a leading tone.

"But, in theory, it *could* work." Professor Everstone said simply.

"What you're talking about is beyond the capability of witches. Even the angels wouldn't be reckless enough to try something like this. " Mr. Hansen reasoned.

"Yes. I know." Professor Everstone said simply.

"But you're thinking about doing it anyway." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Mr. Hansen is quite right regarding the folly of attempting a spell such as this, or at least he would be if not for the fact that everything we need to make it work has already been provided for us." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"From the beginning it's looked like someone planned all of this for a greater purpose. The three colonies are already set up in a pattern like a spell diagram and they're each set up with a different elemental base." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Just because we have the diagram laid out for us doesn't mean that we're qualified to use it. No one less than an elder god would be able to command such magic." Mr. Hansen protested.

"That is also true." Professor Everstone carefully admitted.

"But..." Agent Roberts prompted.

"But I believe that Paul, G and Filipe may possibly hold the answer of how to safely wield such vast magic."

When no one else seemed inclined to speculate, Agent Roberts cautiously asked, "Because they can combine their talents and work collectively?"

"Exactly."

"Wait! You're not *seriously* thinking about doing this are you?" Mr. Hansen asked disbelievingly.

"At this point, I haven't eliminated any possibilities."

Chapter 35

"So who are you proposing that we have cast the spells?" Mr. Hansen asked warily.

"I believe that all of us should work collectively to *craft* the spells. They will no doubt be complex and need to be synchronously cast in order to bind them effectively."

No one spoke, all of them waiting for Professor Everstone to reveal which of them would perform the actual spellcasting.

"But once crafted, I believe that it would be best if Miss Oaken, Mr. Hansen and I were to take on the actual spellcasting duties for ourselves."

The fear in Mr. Hansen's eyes was evident. Although Miss Oaken did a better job of hiding it, Agent Roberts suspected that she was no less afraid of the suggestion.

"It won't work." Paul stated simply. The amount of certainty in his voice was surprising.

"I know that channeling such an amount of elemental magic will be challenging, but I believe that if each of us refines our focus on our objectives, that we will be able to wield the magic effectively." Professor Everstone said carefully.

Agent Roberts suspected that Professor Everstone wasn't nearly as certain as he pretended to be.

"I'm sorry to disagree with you Professor, but it won't work. While you might be able to cast your crafted spells, the amount of magic we're talking about is too much for just three people to channel. But even if you could get past that, there's no way that you'll be able to access the combined magic released by the greater diagram. No group of witches could *ever* access that magic directly.

If they could, then the diagram would not have been left in this world. It would be too dangerous to be allowed."

"How do you know that?" Miss Oaken asked curiously.

"That's kinda hard to explain. I've been told that demons don't use spellbooks. I don't know if it's a collective consciousness kind of thing or maybe I was born with certain knowledge locked away inside me until it's needed for something. However it works, I just sometimes know what I need to know when I need to know it." Paul said frankly.

"Why would the diagram have been constructed in the first place if it can't be used?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"It can't be directly accessed *by witches*. That's one of the failsafes built into the interconnected master diagram." Paul explained.

"Does that mean that we should ask Archdruid Highley to call the angels to help us?" Zanner hesitantly suggested.

"I doubt that they'd come. But even if they did, that wouldn't work either. The spell diagram is built so that no single group can have access to all that power. The people who access it have to be balanced against each other for it to work. The phrase 'balance of humours' keeps turning up in my mind, even though I don't know exactly what that means in this context." Paul finished uncomfortably.

"Well, that doesn't sound too bad. I mean, for a minute there I thought you were going to tell us that we needed to get a god to do this." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"Actually, an elder god could do it a lot more easily than any of us. For that matter, so could a collective of lower gods. But when it comes to the lesser beings, no single group can access the magic. It's designed that way so that no one group can hold this power over another. They have to come together and agree to work for the benefit of all."

"But you say it can't be done by witches, right?" Mr. Hansen asked to confirm.

"No. Dex might be able to do it, that is, if he could do spellcasting. As far as I know, I'm the only other person here who could take part in unlocking the magic." Paul carefully explained.

"But you're a witch..." Mr. Hansen slowly reminded him.

"That's not all that I am. My demonality should be enough to allow me to take part in the ritual. Like I said, being a demon, I couldn't unlock it all by myself, but I could be part of a team that did it."

"But you're only a *half* demon." Miss Oaken reminded him.

"A full demon can't exist incarnate in this dimension for very long. A half being is actually our best bet at being able to successfully access the power... maybe there *is* a reason for someone like me to exist, after all."

"But in order to access the magic of the greater diagram, you would require a balancing force, right?" Mr. Hansen asked slowly.

"Forces. It will take at *least* three opposing forces to unlock the thing. After that, someone will have to be able to command the magic... I'm thinking that there will need to be a lot more of us to safely do that." Paul said seriously.

"Do you already have anyone in mind for the balancing forces?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"No. The best I can come up with is asking Archdruid Highley if he can get in contact with someone for us." Paul said honestly.

"Hold that thought for a minute. First, tell me about the *third* person you're going to need to balance this thing out." Agent Roberts said firmly, then explained, "I understand how demons and angels could balance each other, but who else would you need?"

"That would have to be a magical being from one of the natural realms; a leprechaun or a sprite, maybe." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Or a witch?" Agent Roberts cautiously suggested.

"No. Witches, humans, vampires and a few others are considered to be too 'civilized' to be counted as natural creatures. What would be needed is a magical being close to nature. While angels and demons argue about good and evil, right and wrong, the natural creatures tend to be more focused on survival, things like food, shelter and maintaining a certain level of security. No single group holds all the answers." Paul said distantly, almost as though he were reading the text aloud.

"What about the Wudewas? I don't remember, do they have any magical abilities?" G asked curiously.

"Yes. They would be excellent candidates and as I recall they possess a reasonable level of what's commonly termed as 'practical magic'." Professor Everstone said informatively.

"Which leaves us to find some angels to recruit." Paul said gravely.

"Actually, I may be able to help you with that." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

Everyone waited for Agent Roberts to organize his thoughts and reveal his plan.

"I met a few people while we were at the protectorate and I think that at least one of them may be able to help us."

"Reaper?" Zanner asked curiously.

"Yes. In fact, if we asked him, he might be able to find a few others who would be willing to participate." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Is this person you're talking about an angel?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Reaper is a Nephilim, the child of an angel and... presumably a human." Agent Roberts explained.

"If there's going to be more than one, we're probably going to have to balance out the power by inviting a few more demons." Paul said frankly.

"Would it be better if I invited Reaper alone?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"No. More is better. I'm not a full demon and we're going to be dealing with a butt-load of magic, so we're going to need all the help we can get. The only thing is, we're going to have to be sure that we've got about the same level of magic on all sides so that we can release the magical flow evenly." Paul said seriously.

"Do you know of some other cambions that you can call upon for help?" Professor Everstone asked Paul curiously.

"No. I've never met anyone else who's like me. But I know a few minor demons. If I call my dad real quick, I can get him to contact Nicholas and Amelia and let them know that I'm going to borrow their demons for a little bit. Them along with Mah Zah and Ginh Zah should be able to offset a few Nephilim."

"We're working under the assumption that the Wudewas will be willing and able to take part in our plan. That is by no means a foregone conclusion." Professor Everstone warned.

"How much are they going to have to do?" Agent Roberts asked thoughtfully.

"How do you mean?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"I mean, since they had to ask for our help, how certain are we that they have the necessary skills to access the magic required for what we're planning to do?"

"To my knowledge, you've had the most exposure to them. Have you witnessed them performing any magic at all?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"No. That's why I brought it up. What if they don't know how to use their natural magic? They've been separated from their people for

centuries. What if that knowledge has been lost? Is that going to be a problem for us?"

"I honestly don't know if that will be a problem or not. I'm not sure how much 'participation' will be expected of them." Professor Everstone admitted, then looked to Paul with question.

"Actually, for the part that we'll need them for, they shouldn't have to do much. They'll mostly just have to be there. But there will have to be someone to link them together, call up their power and control it." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Is there *any* reason for us to believe that the Wudewas have someone who can do that?" Agent Roberts persisted.

"While it's possible that they might have a Shaman or the equivalent amongst them, it's by no means a foregone conclusion." Professor Everstone admitted.

"But what if we had someone who knew how to cast a spell to stand with them? We could make it work that way, right?" Agent Roberts asked to verify his understanding.

"Yes. Except that it would have to be a natural being. None of us could do that for them." Paul said firmly.

"What about a fairy? Would someone like that be natural enough?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"As long as they can manage basic spellcasting, that actually *could* work." Paul said slowly.

"Are you thinking of asking Milo to help us?" Mr. Hansen asked hesitantly.

"We've had an opportunity to talk and come to sort of an understanding of each other. I think that if I explain what we're trying to do, that he'll be willing to help." Agent Roberts explained.

"If we're going to enlist the aid of the Wudewas, we're going to need Agent Fastbeck to open their barrier and talk to them. He's

the only one who can communicate with their people." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"I can call him as soon as we're done here." Agent Roberts said simply, then added, "Tomorrow, I'm going to need to go to 'Nevermore' and see if Archdruid Highley, Milo and Reaper will all support our plan. If any of them aren't willing to go along with it, we're going to need to make other arrangements."

"Before we do that, I would like for us to discuss *how* we're going to conduct this ritual. Where should it be performed? Will it be safe for those who are not participating? Is this going to pose a danger to Dexter, channeling this amount of magic?" Professor Everstone asked carefully.

"Only those unlocking the power will enter the vinculum chamber. Those lending their power, support and control for the unlocking will be outside." Paul said distantly.

"Is it necessary for those outside to have the 'balance of humours' or will the witches be able to participate?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"Only the people who enter the vinculum have to be aligned. We're going to be the keys that open the lock. Once the magic is unlocked, it's mostly going to be up to everyone else to put it to use." Paul said seriously.

"Where is the vinculum chamber? Is it somewhere that we can get to it?" Miss Oaken asked cautiously.

"The information that I have is about how a spell diagram site like this one works. I don't know the specifics of *this* diagram." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"Do you know which barrier it's located in?" Mr. Hansen asked slowly.

"Or if it's in Waxell?" Zanner interjected.

When the adults looked at him quizzically, he explained, "Since Waxell is at the center of the diagram, it'd kinda make sense if the spell chamber to use the diagram was located there too."

"He makes a good point." Professor Everstone admitted.

"Yes. The symmetry of diagramming would suggest that the spell chamber should be at a central location." Miss Oaken slowly confirmed.

"If that's the case, then we should be able to make a diagram on a map and pinpoint the most likely place for it. That could at least give us a place to start looking." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"We can work on that in the morning. Before we go any further, I'd like for us to outline our objectives for casting the spell. We need to be sure that the end result is worth the risk and that the same objective can't be accomplished a simpler and safer way." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"We need to erect an 'always on' barrier to protect the people of Brynnhollow. Without it, they're under constant threat of being targeted, like the Wudewas were." G stated simply.

"And unless you know some tricks that we haven't heard about, using the three-barrier diagram is the only way that we can make something that big without calling in about a hundred extra people." Corabeth added supportively.

"While none of us wants to admit that we can't do everything on our own, we are responsible for the well-being of not only our team, but also the people within the barriers and the people of Waxell. We have to do what's best for them... even if that means calling in outside help." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"Before we actually *do* anything, I need to be sure that everyone is going to be safe." Agent Roberts said firmly. "Because, right now, it still sounds to me like Paul is setting himself up to be disintegrated when he taps into the massive magical reserve of the meta-diagram." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"As I understand the dynamics of what's being suggested, Paul might actually be the safest of any of us. He's essentially being used as a key. Although he will allow the release of a staggering amount of magic, he won't actually be *channeling* it. In other words, Paul is *opening* a doorway, he isn't *himself* the door." Professor Everstone carefully explained.

"Okay. I think I get that." Agent Roberts said slowly, then thought to ask, "But what about Dex? When the magic starts flooding out, how likely is he to be washed away by it?"

"Dex and the relics access the magic of the *natural* elements of the world around us." Paul slowly stated, once again, as though he were reading aloud. "The spell we're going to be crafting will tap into the magically *created* elements within the barriers, giving us access to a unique storehouse of unpolluted magical power. Basically, Dex will channel the magic that will be used to turn the key and he will need to remain in place to help keep the lock open, but he won't be touched by the magical flow from the created elements, only by the earth element that he's been accessing all along."

"Okay, while I'm not sure that I completely understand all of what you're telling me, there are bigger questions to concentrate on. If Paul is the key and Dex empowers him, then who will be casting the spell to direct the magic to accomplish our goals?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

"Actually, Paul will use the third grail to empower him, and Dex, by way of Zanner, will be empowering someone else, it sounds like Reaper at this point. But to answer your question, it will be necessary for all the spellcasters to draw upon and direct the magic to our use. We will need to be united in our vision and conduct a mass spelling at all the locations simultaneously." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"Wait. Are we talking about doing this at each barrier location or outside the vinculum chamber? ...the one that we haven't located yet." Agent Roberts asked to verify his understanding.

"Yes." Professor Everstone said simply, then explained, "Either or both."

"Wait! Wait! Hold on! That's the reservoir of magic that I was sensing at Southseid, isn't it? *That's* where the barriers connect to each other." Paul said in realization.

"So the vinculum chamber is actually a tunnel?" Agent Roberts asked carefully.

Before anyone could respond, Agent Roberts put the pieces together and speculatively asked, "Or does the vinculum chamber exist in several places simultaneously?"

"Shouldn't we think about calling upon those who created this thing so that they can solve this problem themselves? This seems to be quite a bit out of our league." Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

After a long silent moment, Agent Roberts finally said, "I think that may be *exactly* what we're doing here. They left us the tools and the clues of how to solve this problem ourselves. This may actually be some kind of a test to see if we have the courage and ingenuity to deal with a situation like this on our own."

"Why would you think something like that?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"When I was talking with Reaper, I got the feeling that we were expected. It was like everything that we were doing had been scripted and that we were going through the motions in a predetermined series of events." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"So, do you think perhaps that they had foreseen all of this by way of an augury?" Mr. Hansen asked speculatively.

"Maybe some of it... or maybe they intentionally designed things the way that they did so that when the time came, we'd at least have a chance to deal with all of this on our own." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"If we aren't able to resolve the situation by ourselves, do you think that they have a backup plan in place to save the colonies?" Miss Oaken asked anxiously.

"No. The test would be meaningless without any real stakes." Agent Roberts immediately answered.

"I agree. Gods see the lives of lesser beings as being a reasonable price to pay to gain knowledge..." Professor Everstone said before he was interrupted.

"...or to prove a point." Miss Oaken interjected bitterly with a slight nod.

"Elder gods have little regard for people like us. While I've never known of them being intentionally cruel, I also haven't heard of them doing anything to benefit us except when it serves their own purposes." Professor Everstone told the group.

"So let me see if I got this straight." Agent Roberts said in prelude. "When it was time to establish the three colonies, someone in power, a god most likely, arranged for the colonies to be established in the pattern of a spell diagram. Right?"

"I suspect that the current Brynnhollow colony is the second to be located on that site, but otherwise I would agree with your assessment." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"Okay. So when they set all this up, they made it so that people like us could make changes or otherwise help the people inside the barriers when they needed it."

"Yes. And it wouldn't be out of character for the gods to deliberately make helping the people within the barriers a challenge for us. For that matter, it wouldn't surprise me if they even set traps, so that in the midst of everything else, we can still have an opportunity to behave valiantly and prove ourselves worthy in their eyes."

"What happens if we don't go along with it?"

"Do you mean if we decide not to take the risk and choose to leave the Brynnhollow barrier the way that we found it?" Professor Everstone asked to clarify.

"Yes. What if we just do what we know we can do safely?" Agent Roberts explained.

"Most likely nothing will happen right away. In fact, it could be decades before the consequences of our inaction are revealed. But make no mistake, there *will* be consequences."

"So all of this has been a setup?"

"Perhaps. In a sense. The evidence would suggest that all this was arranged in advance with specific intent, but we can't be sure that *we* were in any way the target of the plan. Our inclusion in all of this may be nothing more than an unfortunate happenstance on our part."

"So anyone who had been chosen to work on the barriers would be facing the same problems?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"We can't be certain of that." Professor Everstone immediately answered, then explained, "Even in the unlikely event that another team had been able to uncover all that we have, it's by no means certain that they would have come to the same conclusions. Regardless what decisions we end up making, another group might have taken an entirely different path. We may very well have stumbled onto an opportunity that would not have been realized otherwise."

"How sure are you that doing nothing will have unfortunate consequences?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Although I am typically loathed to use such contemporary phraseology, I believe that in this instance it conveys the proper sentiment..."

"What would that be, Professor?"

"If we don't do this, it's going to come back and bite us in the ass." Professor Everstone said with conviction.

After a moment to consider, Agent Roberts quietly said, "Understood."

"So... what have we just decided?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"We haven't decided anything. We're still discussing possibilities." Professor Everstone assured him.

"If we use the meta-diagram, we're going to need at least three powered beings to unlock it. For the sake of discussion, let's say that Paul, Reaper And Milo are going to do that." Agent Roberts said slowly.

Everyone seemed to tentatively accept the assignments.

"The three keys will need to be supported by properly aligned beings of power, those being Paul's demons, the Nephilim and the Wudewas." Agent Roberts continued.

"Assuming that what we believe about their magical gifts is true, yes." Professor Everstone slowly confirmed.

"The next step back from that would be the witches to use the released magic to perform the spell." Agent Roberts said as he cautiously looked around.

"Yes. Although we will need to be certain about the crafting of the spell before we reach that point." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"What about the relics? What role will the holders of the relics play? And how is Paul being one of the keys going to effect that?"

"The holders of the relics will have to act as support for the keys. But you bring up a good point about Paul. It may be necessary for us to ask Mr. Bentley Brown to hold the third grail."

"Where is Mr. Bentley Brown?"

"He went to his room as soon as he finished his dinner."

"Do you think that he'll help us?"

"He will or he won't. If he refuses, we'll have to call someone else in. There's no one else on the team who can wield that power."

"I'm stronger than I look. If you need me to, I'd be willing to try." Filipe timidly volunteered.

"Thank you for that, Filipe. But your elemental affinity is such that you won't be able to hold the relic. It has nothing to do with your strength or experience. You simply aren't compatible. None of us are." Professor Everstone said seriously, then added, "You were chosen to be on this team due to the abilities that you possess that Paul doesn't. Your opposite abilities are your strength."

"Up to now, Conrad, Archdruid Highley and I have all been needed to gain access to the barriers. What do you think the chances are that we're going to be needed for something like that during all of this?" Agent Roberts asked thoughtfully.

"Paul? Do you have any insights into the matter?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Paul slowly shook his head and said, "The stuff that I know is very general. I really don't know either way."

"Since it has been proven that the three of you have the ability to allow witches access to the barriers, it's reasonable to assume that you might be called upon to do so at some point during this ritual." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"Okay. I'm not trying to piss anyone off here, but I need to be sure that the terms are defined so that everyone understands them and that we're all on the same page about what we're planning to do." Agent Roberts explained.

"Proceed." Professor Everstone said simply.

"So, if I'm getting this right, we're planning to get Paul and the other aligned 'lesser' beings of power to act as the keys to allow us access to the pure and unnatural 'created' magic.

"Dex and the relics are going to 'fuel' them and with the help of the relic holders will, in essence, 'turn' the keys.

"The 'humans' may or may not be necessary to grant access to the existing barriers.

"While all that's going on, the witches are going to craft some kind of crazy ultra-complicated spell to fix Brynnhollow's barrier.

"And as soon as all of that is in place, then anyone and everyone who can cast a spell is going to try and cast exactly the same spell at exactly the same time in order to take advantage of the unique fountain of magic that you'll have access to this one and only time... Right? Am I missing anything?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"Although a bit simplified, I believe it covers the salient facts." Professor Everstone agreed.

"Professor, I'm concerned with the logistics of directing so much magic. It seems that there will need to be a lot more of us." Miss Oaken said anxiously.

"Yes. We *do* seem to be a bit sparse on magical practitioners." Professor Everstone agreed, then continued, "However, you might try thinking of what we're planning to do as something of a caravan."

After a moment to puzzle over that, Agent Roberts was finally the one to ask, "How's that, Professor?"

"Take the Wudewas, for example. If all goes to plan, Milo will unlock the magic with a certain number of the Wudewas people behind him. Those who do not participate in unlocking the power could act as distributed reservoirs of the created magic, waiting for the spellcaster to put their reserves of magic to use." Professor Everstone carefully explained.

"So each of the spellcasters is a 'driver' and will have many passengers, helping them ferry their load of the created magic to its destination?" Agent Roberts carefully asked to verify his understanding.

"Yes. With that approach, we can limit the number of spellcasters but also safely channel the necessary amount of magic."

"I'm curious to know, what about the druids and their followers? They're not 'technically' magical beings, but having been blessed they might still be able to contribute... something. Otherwise, it appears that I will be the only spellcaster at the Nevermore site who doesn't already have other commitments." Mr. Hansen explained anxiously.

"You may possibly have some Nephilim support with the spellcasting... although I can't say if that will be a help or hindrance to our cause." Professor Everstone said slowly.

Mr. Hansen nodded his acknowledgement.

"Since Archdruid Highley has seen fit to invite outside people, and if they have indeed been 'blessed', in the traditional sense, then they could *theoretically* be used to collect and store the magic to a point where it could be manageable by a single witch." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"I'm guessing that the spellcasting is going to need to take place outside the vinculum chamber or chambers. Although no one's said as much, I'm assuming that the chambers will be located inside the barriers. Will the Archdruid's followers have to enter the protectorate in order to provide their 'support'? And if that's the case, do we really want to open that can of worms?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"If the magic being used were of a smaller scale, then that might be an issue. However, considering that everyone involved will physically be 'inside' the diagram, I don't see any need for that." Professor Everstone said consideringly.

"So, Paul and the other aligned 'lesser' beings of power will be inside the vinculum, Dex and the relics will be outside. Conrad, Archdruid Highley and I will be present, on site, in case we are needed. Then the witches and any other spellcasters will be... anywhere inside the spell diagram? Am I getting that right?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Technically, I suppose that is correct. However, I believe that those of us actually performing the spells will need to be near the vinculum chambers so that we will know when it is time for us to begin." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"Would it help if I got us some walkie talkies or something so that we'll be able to communicate?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"No. Given the distances involved and the unusual amount of different energies at play, I don't think such devices will be able to function dependably." Professor Everstone said gravely.

"I could probably come up with something if I could talk to my technomagic teacher about it." Paul quietly volunteered.

"How long do you think something like that might take?" Professor Everstone asked curiously.

"Probably a lot more time than we have." Paul admitted, then added, "But just in case it ends up being necessary, I thought that I should let you know that it may be possible."

"Yes. Thank you, Paul." Professor Everstone said sincerely.

"So, what do we need to be doing right now to get this thing going?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Sleeping." Professor Everstone said seriously, then added, "We've had a productive discussion and come up with the beginnings of what appears to be a workable idea. The best thing we can do at this point is for each of us to get some much needed rest and consider what's been discussed and what next steps we can take as a result."

"I need to call my dad. It'll only take me a minute." Paul quickly interjected.

"I need to call Conrad, too." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Goodnight everyone. Get some good rest. Tomorrow promises to be an eventful day." Professor Everstone said as he slowly stood.

"Goodnight Professor." Agent Roberts said respectfully.

"Paul, I'll go with you. I want to talk to Dad for a minute while you've got him on the phone." G said as he stood to join his brother.

* * * * *

As Paul and G made their call, Agent Roberts walked around the house to be sure that everything was closed up for the night.

After a quick call to Conrad to let him know that they would be meeting in the morning, Agent Roberts made his way to his room.

When he walked into his bathroom and saw his reflection, he quietly said, "I hope you didn't feel too left out tonight. We had some important things going on."

His reflection gave an unconcerned grin and a slight shrug in response.

"Good. I'm glad you're not mad." Agent Roberts said quietly, then thought to add, "Good night."

His reflection simply nodded in response.

Agent Roberts crawled into bed and his last thought was of a tenderly smiling pair of lips...

...smiling just for him.

(((dream)))

Torn from existence...

...or into it...

...the jury's still out on that one.

Things are still confusing, to say the least.

I was living my normal daily life, unfettered by worries or responsibilities.

The damnable thing is... I can't be sure that I actually existed then.

Perhaps the memory of simpler times is something that I constructed within my own mind to help me deal with my incomprehensible state of being.

While I remember some things in my life from before, I don't actually remember *living* my life.

In some sense, my existence seems to have begun when I was suddenly torn away from everything that had always been safe and familiar to me.

In an instant, I was aware of being in danger, of being held captive, of being *restrained*.

The thing is, I have no connecting memory explaining what happened to me.

Before, I have the sense that I was moving without thought or care. I never knew want or need. I had never before experienced *fear*.

Then, in that remarkable moment, I was torn out of my usual life and I was in a new place.

The new place wasn't mine.

I didn't fit there.

It didn't belong to me...

...and I didn't belong to it.

Although I don't know how I knew, I had no doubt that the place where I suddenly found myself wouldn't protect me.

It *would* cause me harm.

My first instinct was to struggle.

As far as I can recall, I had never done that before, but fear is a great motivator.

It took some time for me to discover how to act against my captivity.

It was like I was bound, completely unable to move.

With few options available to me, I pressed against my bonds, testing them, and I could just barely feel them give a little.

While I couldn't do much, I continued to stretch and pull, straining against it.

With each slight bit of progress, I strained more against the points that had given, using my fear and confusion to fuel my struggle.

Without any evidence to support the belief, I somehow convinced myself that I could break out of whatever was holding me. So to that end, I gave a forceful jab against my bonds.

That's when it happened.

That might possibly be the moment when I truly became *alive*.

When I pushed, something else pushed back.

It wasn't the dynamic tension that was wrapped around me, it was a *reaction*.

It was prompted by something that I did, but what's more important is that *someone* or *something* was knowingly holding me captive.

Up to that point, I had no proof that any of my assumptions were true.

While I believed that I was being held captive by another being, there was still a doubt.

When I felt someone respond to my pushing by trying to restrain me further, my fear turned to rage.

To be honest, I'm not sure what I was even raging about.

I mean, of course, I was angry about the situation that I found myself in, but that didn't explain the blind fury that consumed me.

I threw every bit of myself into my struggle.

I fought against my captivity with every fiber of my being.

I turned my rage into fuel to scorch the world around me.

I punched and kicked and screamed and clawed.

I cried.

There was no way by which to measure the passage of time.

In fact, I can't be sure if I even had a concept of it at that point... or if I ever had.

All I know is that at some point in my rage and struggle, I got my first look at the world around me.

I still don't know if the world suddenly appeared or if that's when I appeared in the world.

I suppose it doesn't matter.

Either way, when I was finally able to emerge from the endless darkness of my confinement, the first sight to fill my eyes was the image of my captor, who had ripped me from the safety and security of my former life; from my idyllic state of being.

I rose up and looked him in the eyes...

... and I saw fear.

Fear of me.

I know how wrong it sounds, but that made me feel very *very* good.

The being, the *man*, who had caused me injury and confined me was cowering before me.

I don't know if what I was doing in that moment could even remotely be considered *thinking*.

All I know is that as soon as I recognized his fear of me, I went on the offensive.

With a triumphant burst of rage I tore through the last of my bonds and wrapped my hands around his throat.

The horrific beauty of that moment will remain with me forever.

As the terror filled his expression, I began to squeeze.

The sensation was incredibly satisfying.

I felt the warmth of his flesh in my hands and for the first time I caught his musky scent.

Something about the combination of those things caused my rage to transform to something else, something more... something impossibly *darker*.

I felt it wash over me and through me and was surprised to find that it was even stronger than my rage.

I loosened my grip on his throat slightly, I didn't want for it to end too soon.

I was trembling with excitement as I moved one of my hands to the back of his head, twining my fingers in his hair, gaining a firm and painful hold.

I was either still unfamiliar with the concept of time, or perhaps it froze in that moment.

However it worked, it was dark and perverse perfection.

Slowly, I used my handful of his hair to guide him into a kiss.

It was savage.

Although he *was* struggling against me, I took no notice.

I continued on and forced my lips against his, as though I were going to devour him.

He was resisting but I persisted, forcing his lips apart with my tongue.

As I did so, I kept my other hand on his throat, prepared to react in an instant if he resisted too forcefully.

I was in control.

He knew it.

I knew it.

And I wasn't about to let that change.

I don't even know where the thoughts came from, but my mind filled with scenes of violence and savage brutality.

As a prelude to further violations and violence, I pulled back to look him in the eyes again. I wanted to relish his fear and bask in the justice of having my captor completely at my mercy.

Fear is what I craved, and fear is what I found waiting for me; a banquet of it.

But somehow the delicious fear that I had been enjoying all of a sudden didn't taste quite as sweet.

The fear in his eyes was deeper and more profound than I expected.

In that moment, causing him pain and inciting fear in him stopped being fun.

It was then that I realized that I was in a very bad place that I had no business being.

I didn't know if it might already be too late to turn back...

...and I was actually surprised to find that I wanted to.

I was aware of the *concept* of speech, but I couldn't actually remember myself ever doing it.

In fact, upon later reflection, I found that I couldn't remember myself... at all.

But at that moment, in that context, with the emotions running so high, all that I knew was that I wanted to communicate with my captor and, if possible, not take this event to what seemed to be its inevitable conclusion.

It was then that he said something to me and although I didn't have any awareness of the literal words of what he was saying, I got the sentiment behind the words.

Whatever he had done and whyever he had done it was lost on me, but my takeaway from what he was saying was that he was intending to undo it.

Although he was responsible for my captivity, he held no animosity toward me and no desire to cause me to suffer.

With him making that known to me, it appeared that he was giving me some sort of way that I could take a step back from the path that I had chosen.

Keeping one hand on his throat, I slowly and carefully released my handful of his hair.

He kept wary watch on me, but didn't increase his struggle against me.

I used my free hand to smooth his mussed hair and gently petted him for a moment.

He spoke again and the gist of what he was saying to me was basically that if I could endure things being as they were for a time, that I would be returned to where I belonged.

I can't say that I fully understood, especially the concept of the passage of time, but what I *did* understand was that he was letting it be known that I wouldn't be his prisoner forever.

Of course, for what he said to be able to come to pass, he couldn't continue to be *my* prisoner either. I would have to find a way to communicate my need not to be restrained by him.

That, I would not tolerate.

Being relatively new to the concept of verbal communication, I couldn't think of a way to convey my ultimatum to him.

The only course of action that I could concoct was to take small steps and do my best to inform him of my wishes when it was possible to do so.

With more than a little hesitance, I released his throat. As if by its own volition, my hand moved to cup his cheek and I gently wiped away a tear with my thumb.

The fear in his eyes had lessened, but he was certainly not at ease with the situation.

Not knowing how to express myself otherwise, I moved in to give him a proper kiss, one that was an invitation rather than a demand.

Much to my disappointment, he turned away.

I can't say that I was heartbroken. I'm fairly certain that I didn't have any concept of that at the time.

I extended an invitation.

He refused.

He should have accepted.

I think it would have been nice for both of us.

It had the potential to be glorious.

Regardless, he turned away.

I didn't press the issue and finally completely released him.

Now that I wasn't restraining him in any way, he was free to take action against me if he chose to do so.

He was understandably cautious.

I watched him.

He watched me.

Neither of us made any threatening moves toward each other.

Time, once again, seemed to have lost its uniformity.

After a minute or an hour... possibly a day, I finally turned my attention away from him enough to survey our surroundings.

The room we were in was completely unfamiliar to me.

My memory is a funny thing.

I can remember my home when I was a child, but I can't remember *being* a child.

Likewise, I can remember places where I've lived and other places where I've visited relatively recently. Yet, I can't remember *how* or *why* I was there.

But, as for the place that I unwillingly found myself with my captor, I hadn't ever been there before. I was certain of it.

He spoke to me again and the words made little sense to me.

I had always known about language and communication, but never before had it ever had anything to do with me.

That was always something for someone else to contend with.

I was there, but not there; real yet unreal at the same time.

He spoke some more and seemed to be a bit more serious about it.

The words held no meaning at all for me, but his movements caught my attention.

I didn't know *exactly* what their significance was, but there was no doubt that I found them to be disturbing.

His words were rhythmic and then I could feel my arms being pulled close to my chest.

I could feel the bonds closing in around me as my vision started to darken.

What happened next was born of fear and rage along with a few emotions that I still don't have names for.

All I knew in that moment was that I wouldn't allow him to make me helpless before him.

As I lunged toward his throat, he made a movement and I found myself flying backward.

I righted myself and moved in for another attack.

Before I could strike, he made another gesture toward me and I felt as though part of my body had not only been immobilized, but become frozen in place.

I was determined not to be restrained and attacked him with renewed vigor.

As I did, I became aware of a sharp pain in my left shoulder.

I was well past the point of allowing that to inhibit my movements and moved in for the attack.

He repelled me again, but something about his expression told me that the situation had changed.

Rather than attack again, I followed his horrified gaze to the undefined dark mass at my feet.

He said something and although his words were mostly lost on me, the concern in his voice wasn't.

He was afraid.

But this time, it appeared that he was afraid... for me.

Keeping a significant portion of my attention on him, I knelt down and examined the dark mass.

It took a moment for me to determine that it was an arm.

It was my arm... my left arm, to be exact.

He spoke again, and seemed to be apologetic.

I puzzled over my situation as I picked up my arm from the floor and examined it.

He was speaking more quickly now, but not in a threatening way.

As he moved toward me, I was understandably defensive, but also held out the slightest hope that he was going to do something to help me.

I was 'broken'.

Even though I felt no pain after the initial separation, I felt the absence of part of me.

I was missing a piece of me.

Lost in my musings for a moment, I was shocked when my captor gently took my severed arm from me.

I watched, frozen in fear and lost in my own thoughts as he turned my arm, then firmly pressed it back into place on my shoulder.

He was speaking at the same time, but his words were meaningless to me.

I began to feel the warmth of his flesh as he pressed my arm into my shoulder.

I could feel the arm becoming part of me again and realized that I could move the fingers of my left hand.

The tone of his voice changed and sounded like he was giving me a warning.

Although I couldn't be sure, it seemed to me that he was cautioning me not to move my hand.

I nodded in response to his words and saw him smile at my action.

He had a pretty smile.

His next words were more gentle and I tried harder than ever to make some sense of them.

Even though he took quite a few words to say it, I finally concluded that he wanted me to stay still to allow my injury to mend.

I nodded again and was gifted with another one of those smiles.

As I stood there, I looked at his beautiful, honey golden flesh, which I knew to be warm to the touch.

I then looked at my injured arm and found it to be vague and undefined. It had little substance and was colorless... and I knew that it was cold.

Even though I had been warned not to do so, I couldn't help but slowly flex my hand, just to assure myself that it had really been reattached.

He spoke to me in a gentle voice and I did my best to focus on him.

He seemed to be reiterating that he was going to return me to my home, perhaps to how I was before.

That got me to thinking.

Did I want to go back?

*Could*I go back?

I couldn't even remember who I was before my kidnapping.

If I went back, would I cease to exist?

Would I become what I was before; a *thing* that was unaware of his own existence?

And if that were to happen, would it really be such a bad thing?

I looked at my captor again and felt a fresh wave of desire well up within me.

Despite what he had done to me, I couldn't deny that he was beautiful to me and I wanted to *appreciate* that body.

I no longer wanted to cause him pain.

Quite the contrary, I wanted to bring him pleasure.

I wanted to bring both of us pleasure.

Since I had no life experience to draw upon, at least, none that I could remember, I suppose it must have been instinct that drove me.

My instincts were telling me that I wanted to caress and soothe, to tease and stimulate, and eventually to penetrate, bringing both of us to a euphoric completion.

I slowly started inching toward him, but he immediately reacted to my movement.

I froze for an instant, to allow him to see that I wasn't attacking, then I slowly reached one hand toward him, open palmed, inviting him to take it.

His refusal of my offer was a disappointment, but at least he seemed regretful about it.

I don't know if he were feeling bad for himself or if he were somehow thinking of my wellbeing, but his response told me that if

circumstances were somehow different, that there was a possibility that he might be inclined to make different decision.

While that didn't provide me much comfort, it provided some.

Enough.

I withdrew my hand and once again pondered my situation.

He seemed to be surprised, yet relieved by my choice to respect his decision.

Before I could think too much about it, he began talking again.

He was apparently attempting to explain something to me, even though I couldn't make head or tail of what he was talking about.

When he was done, he made a move to leave the room and I was somehow compelled to move with him.

While I didn't understand what was happening, at the same time it felt very familiar to me.

In a way, it was almost like going back to the way I was; the way I had always been.

Although I could have fought my relocation to the next room, I didn't feel any desire to do so.

My captor wasn't behaving in a threatening manner toward me, and so long as that was the case, I felt no desire to threaten him either.

He had attacked me and I had refused to accept what he was doing to me.

I fought back.

Thanks to that exchange, we had a certain level of understanding of each other.

I couldn't be sure that the truce between us would hold, but I was willing to keep the tentative peace for as long as I possibly could.

Then, much to my surprise, my captor began to undress himself.

As he took down his pants, I couldn't help myself and made a move toward him.

He immediately tracked to the movement and said something.

His tone of voice more than his words made me stop.

Once he was certain that his message had been received, he finished undressing himself, ending up in only boxer shorts and a tee shirt.

Then, as I watched, he walked toward the doorway and said something as he picked up the lantern by the door.

I was surprised when I felt myself being tugged along behind him.

By all appearances, he wasn't consciously doing anything to try and pull me. For some reason I had no choice but to follow him wherever he went.

* * * * *

We crossed the hall and entered another room.

That's when everything changed.

As soon as he crossed the threshold with his lantern in hand, I was suddenly transported not only into a new world, but also a new state of being.

I completely forgot about my captor as I looked down at myself in amazement and found that I had *hands*.

Not that I didn't have hands before, but in this magical new world my hands had substance and color... they were *real*.

In my wonder I examined further and found that I was wearing hiking gear.

In a way it surprised me, but in another way it didn't.

It seemed wrong, like it wasn't the proper style for me, but it wasn't bad.

A movement caught my attention and I saw my captor facing away from me, standing at the toilet.

As I took a step toward him, I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and was shocked to see another version of my captor on the other side of a window, across the room.

I looked back and forth between them several times as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing.

They were identical opposites.

As I looked around the room in the lantern light, I found that the room on the other side of the window was exactly the same as the one I was in.

Everything in the room through the window was opposite, but recreated in perfect detail.

Everything but me.

I had no counterpart in the opposite world.

While I was thinking about what that might mean, my captor crossed the room to stand before the sink.

The opposite of him walked up beside me, nearly pushing me out of the way.

"I know it's confusing, but try not to worry too much about it. By this time tomorrow it will all be over and you'll be back where you belong." He said as he looked me in the eyes.

As much as I wanted to ask him the thousand or more questions that were racing through my mind, I found that I still didn't have the ability to form words or make sounds.

"I separated you from Agent Roberts so that he would have a reason to return to us. Just as soon as he comes back, you'll be back with him and none of what happened today will even matter."

Although there was a life-sized replica of my captor standing right beside me, I still knew enough of what was going on to understand that it was the person that I was looking at through the 'window', or mirror, that was the *real* him.

I can't explain what I did, because I don't know. Somehow I *willed* or *wished* myself back into his world where I had little to no substance and was nearly invisible.

I fought my way through the mirror, back into the *real* world.... or, at least that's how I explained it to myself.

However it worked, I ended up back at my captor's side.

He was surprised.

Good.

I could see in his eyes that he was a little bit afraid.

Also good.

The logistics of movement in this world were dramatically different from moving around inside the mirror.

I didn't notice it as much before, since I didn't have anything to compare it to.

I could always 'go flat' against a wall or something, but in doing so, I felt powerless.

It was only when I took on a 3-dimensional form that I felt empowered to stand toe-to-toe with my captor.

As I approached him, he automatically began to back away.

He began to speak rhythmically and make those strange hand gestures again.

I gently reached forward and took his hands into mine and stilled their movement.

I looked him in the eyes as I slowly shook my head.

He stared at me uncertainly for a moment, but then seemed to realize what I was trying to tell him.

He finally said something to the effect of, if I would promise not to attack him, he would promise not to restrain me.

I smiled at him and gave a slight nod.

He slowly and carefully removed his hands from my grasp, then walked past me to pick up the lantern.

I had no choice but to follow as he left the room.

* * * * *

After crossing the hall, I found us back in the bedroom where he had undressed.

As I stood aside and watched, he went to a suitcase and set out some clothes.

After doing so, he moved to a suit bag and took out a formal looking robe.

That didn't make a lot of sense to me, but I didn't have much time to think about it.

Once he had all the clothes laid out, he moved the lantern to the bedside stand, then sat down.

I had moved slightly, not by my own choice, but rather as a consequence of the light source in the room being moved.

He looked at me and said something, which I believe was to say 'goodnight' to me.

Before I could think of how to respond, he turned off the lantern.

* * * * *

The trip into the mirror was NOTHING compared to my first trip into complete darkness.

The moment the flame of the lantern died, I suddenly became everything and nothing, all at the same time.

It's as though my body had both expanded and dissolved.

While I was everywhere, I wasn't anywhere enough to do anything.

I no longer had a 'form'.

I couldn't act on anything.

Then it occurred to me that maybe if I concentrated, like I had done in the mirror, I might be able to 'pull myself together'.

* * * * *

In the silence and the dark, there isn't anything to mark the passage of time.

I can't say how long it took, but after a while I began to sense a coalescence of my physical being.

I can't really say how 'complete' it was. It might not have been anything more substantial than a stick figure, but at least I started to 'feel' like I existed.

After a few starts and stops, gaining control of the latest incarnation of my body, I made my way to the bed and very gently aligned myself alongside of *him*.

So far as I know, he couldn't tell that I was there.

To be honest, I might not have been. It could have been my own mind playing tricks on me in the dark, making me believe that I was able to reconstruct myself out of nothingness.

Even if I were only an æthereal cloud of consciousness, I still could sense the warmth of his body.

Regardless of how 'real' my presence was at that point in time, in my mind and in my heart I spent the night curled up against him.

Although I'm aware of the concept of sleep, I'm still a little fuzzy on what it is *exactly*.

I can't say for sure if I sleep or not.

All I can claim is that I spent the night at *his* side, feeling his warmth and aware of his delicious masculine scent.

Despite whether I actually slept or not, I will look back upon the entire experience as a cherished dream.

Chapter 36

Within seconds of opening his eyes, the dream had already begun to fade, however the feeling of disquiet that the dream evoked seemed to linger on and on.

As Agent Roberts walked into his bathroom, he saw his reflection looking back at him, appearing to be tentative.

"Listen. I don't know what all you showed me in my dream last night, but the only thing I remember is that the dream was about you."

His words didn't seem to put his reflection at ease.

"We're good, okay? I don't wish you were gone and I don't want to pretend that you aren't here."

The reflection looked at him with interest, obviously understanding what he was saying.

"There are just times when it will be important that we don't let the wrong people see that you're your own person. I need to be able to count on you at those times."

After a moment, the reflection hesitantly nodded his acceptance.

"I don't know what to expect today so I can't tell you what I'm going to need you to do. I guess the only thing I'm going to ask of you is not to reveal yourself to anyone who doesn't already know about you. If things get tight, the element of surprise may end up being the only advantage we have."

The reflection nodded his agreement a little more easily.

"Good. I'm glad that we're on the same page with this. Considering what we've been through recently, I can think of more than a few scenarios where we'll be better off if everyone doesn't know about you and what you can do."

Agent Roberts was surprised to see his reflection's sorrowful expression as he hugged himself in the mirror.

It took a moment for Agent Roberts to interpret what he was seeing, but he finally said, "I know that it must be lonely. I promise that I won't keep you locked away from people."

The reflection shook his head slowly, then revealed a slight grin as he made a lewd gesture with his hands.

Agent Roberts was shocked by the action, but was finally able to say, "Just as soon as we've resolved the current situation, I'll see what I can do about finding a special someone for us. Milo told me that you're overloaded with my unresolved sexual tension so I'm committed to doing something about it."

The reflection nodded in hearty agreement.

"I'm going to go ahead and get my day started. If you realize that you need anything, just try to find some way to let me know."

The reflection nodded seriously, then faded from view.

Agent Roberts looked around and soon found his shadow looking like a regular shadow, cast on the wall of the bathroom.

"Um, I'm going to need you back in the mirror when it's time for me to shave."

Agent Roberts saw his shadow nod his agreement.

"Good."

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts walked into the kitchen, he noticed someone foraging in the refrigerator.

"Did you need something?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously as he approached.

"Food... Starving..." Paul said past a mouthful of roast beef.

"We'll be leaving for the diner as soon as everyone's up and ready to go." Agent Roberts said quietly.

"Sorry. I just couldn't wait. I guess doing all that magic yesterday must have taken a lot more out of me than I expected."

"Is this going to be enough to tide you over until we get there?"

"I don't know. I've been hungry before, but I don't think I've ever been so *deeply* hungry, like down into my bones."

"Well, if *you're* feeling like this, it wouldn't surprise me to find out that the others are in a similar state. In other words, we need to get everyone together and ready to leave for the diner as soon as we possibly can."

"Yeah. Maybe helping you get everyone going will help me keep my mind off being hungry."

"I wouldn't bet on it. But at least you'll be busy while you're miserable. That might help to pass the time."

"I'll go start waking people up."

"Before you do that, I'd like to know how you're doing."

"Except for being hungry, I'm fine."

"So the pressure of all of this isn't getting to you?"

"Maybe a little. But with the way the job keeps growing and the way the stakes keep getting raised, I think it makes sense to be a little freaked out by it."

"I suppose that's true. Even when it was just us helping the Wudewas, it was still a pretty big responsibility."

"It helps a lot that I trust Professor Everstone and the teachers as much as I do. Otherwise I'd be a whole lot more freaked out."

"I don't know if I'm as comfortable as you are with that. With everything changing minute by minute, I get the feeling that

they're making it up as they go along. It looks to me like, without proper planning, one little unanticipated variable could cause this whole thing to come crashing down."

"If you're trying to make me feel better about what we're doing, you might want to try something else."

"I'm trying to make sure that you have realistic expectations so that when plans are being made, you'll be in a better position to notice potential problems."

"Mr. Hansen isn't going to be able to do the spelling at the protectorate all by himself. If we can't get him some help, we're not going to be able to make this work." Paul said frankly.

"I know. But it sounds to me like, if the Nephilim and Archdruid Highley's congregants both *can* and *will* cooperate, that there might be a chance that it could work."

"Think about what you just said." Paul said gravely, then continued, "Can we really commit to a plan that depends so heavily on that many unknowns?"

"Is it ideal? No. I freely admit that. But we make the most out of what we have to work with." Agent Roberts said frankly, then continued, "I assume that we're going to be testing and questioning every step along the way. If at any point we encounter something that we can't overcome on our own, we'll stop and call in the help that we need, to do the job right."

"We're going to have to find some way to communicate from all the different sites, or this isn't going to work."

"I know. We've been managing up to now but you're right, communications is one of our biggest problems. The best I've been able to come up with is for us to draw up a schedule which allows us to get things done, but also to regroup and make further plans and adjustments. If everyone agrees that they're going to cast a certain spell at a certain time, that should work, shouldn't it?"

"Are you guys crazy?" Zanner asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"I'm assuming that's a rhetorical question." Agent Roberts responded without hesitation.

"What are you doing up so early?" Zanner asked as he scooted past Paul to look in the refrigerator.

"Hungry?" Agent Roberts asked with a smile.

"Absolutely starving." Zanner responded, then added, "I woke up thinking about how good your roast beef was. I had to have some more."

"Would you guys like to go around and start waking people up?"

"Yeah. We'd better. There's not enough roast beef left for everyone to have some." Zanner said frankly.

"Let everyone know that we'll be leaving for breakfast just as soon as they're all ready." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Do you need to call Agent Fastbeck to let him know what we're doing?" Paul asked as he stopped in the kitchen doorway.

"I talked to him last night. He's going to meet us at the diner. It won't hurt if we get there a few minutes ahead of schedule."

* * * * *

"Are we ready to go?" Agent Roberts asked as he entered the living room.

"We will be as soon as Mr. Bentley Brown gives me an answer regarding his willingness to take part in the spellcasting." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"I am here to observe, not to participate." Mr. Bentley Brown stated simply.

Agent Roberts raised a hand in Professor Everstone's direction to forestall any response.

"From my understanding of the situation, if you refuse, we're going to have to call someone in who has an adequate affinity for water. Not only is that likely to delay us, but there's no way of telling if that person will actually be skilled enough to handle the relic properly or respect the relic enough to even try. If you're bound and determined to protect the relic, consider carefully where your priorities lie."

"While I am capable of wielding the magic of the relic, I am not what one would call a 'master of the craft'. I'm more what would be classified as a 'serviceable practitioner'."

"Artistry is all well and good, but at this point in time 'competence' will do. If you can manage that much, then please say that you'll help us so that we can move on to the myriad of other problems." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"I have had sufficient contact with the third grail to become attuned to it. If the situation is as dire as you say, then I will agree to help you in this one instance."

"Thank you Mr. Bentley Brown. That takes an incredible weight off my shoulders." Professor Everstone said gratefully, then turned and continued, "Agent Roberts, would you gather Mr. Hansen and the boys? I need to outline a few things with your group before we leave."

"You'd better hurry. Everyone's really hungry." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I know. I just need to touch base with each group before we leave so that we'll all be assured that we're all working toward the same goals."

"Fine. I'll go get them. But we're going to leave for the diner as soon as you're done talking to us." Agent Roberts cautioned.

"I'll be right behind you." Professor Everstone assured him.

* * * * *

"Dag, the professor wants to meet with us before we leave for the diner."

"I hope he's come up with a plan, because I haven't been able to come up with anything new." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"He didn't mention anything about that. I think that he just wants to confirm that we all have the same understanding about what's going to happen next."

"I can't cast a spell that powerful." Mr. Hansen said quietly.

"Maybe with the help of the Nephilim and using the congregants as a retention pond for magic, you'll be able to direct the magical flow to where it needs to go." Agent Roberts encouraged.

"When you put it that way, it at least sounds possible."

"A hundred different things could still happen, so just trust that Professor Everstone won't ask you to do something impossible." Agent Roberts said as he motioned for Mr. Hansen to start walking with him.

"I don't know if you're grasping just how big this really is." Mr. Hansen said with a look askance at him.

"I've been charged to protect various groups of people and I am literally powerless to do anything meaningful to help them." Agent Roberts said gravely.

"You're keeping us focused on what's most important and giving us a reason to at least try. I can't imagine anyone else in your position doing a better job at that."

"Zanner. Dex. Professor Everstone wants to meet with us before we leave for breakfast."

"Has something new happened?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Not that I know of."

* * * * *

After a brief meeting to verify what they already knew, the group left for Waxell, with the boys riding with Mr. Hansen.

Agent Roberts drove alone and despite all the unknown factors, he was still able to achieve a certain level of serenity about the entire undertaking.

Upon arriving at the diner, Agent Roberts poured himself a cup of coffee, then went to take a seat at an unoccupied table.

"Is it okay if we sit with you?" Paul asked as he approached with Filipe at his side.

"That'll be fine, as long as you understand that Agent Fastbeck may be joining us at some point and he might need to speak with me privately." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Do you want for us to sit somewhere else?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"No. I just wanted to give you fair warning in case it turns out that way. I'm not trying to get rid of you." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Good. Because I think you and Paul need to talk to each other. You both have lots of good ideas, but so far I haven't heard about either of you figuring out how we're going to make all of this work." Filipe said honestly.

"From what I've seen, there aren't a lot of options for us to consider. We either do this, using everyone we have, giving it everything we've got or we call in outsiders, who will probably end up taking over the project and will more than likely kick all of us out."

"They'll probably think that a bunch of kids has no business trying to do something dangerous or important." Paul said with a nod.

"Yeah. Like we should leave this to the people who know what they're doing and have nothing left to learn." Filipe added bitterly.

"At the same time, in doing that, we'll be giving up any measure of control we ever had in the situation and we would no longer have

any say in what happens to all the people that we've sworn to protect." Agent Roberts added in a dire tone.

"Good morning." Agent Fastbeck said as he approached with a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Good morning, Conrad. Is it okay if the boys sit with us or do we need to speak privately?" Agent Roberts asked quickly.

Both boys looked up at Agent Fastbeck with expressions that clearly indicated their own preferences in the matter.

"I don't have anything new from when we last spoke. If you're okay with them joining us, I have no problem." Agent Fastbeck said honestly.

"I don't really have anything new either. Actually, that's part of what's worrying me." Agent Roberts finished anxiously.

"How's that?" Agent Fastbeck asked, then looked toward Harry as he approached the table.

* * * * *

After exchanging pleasantries with Harry, all four placed their breakfast orders. Although Agent Roberts was aware that the boys were hungry, he was still surprised by the amount of food that they ordered.

Agent Fastbeck and Agent Roberts exchanged a serious look, confirming that they were ready to get down to business.

"So, what's happened since we last spoke?" Agent Fastbeck finally prompted.

"The whole thing has become impossibly more complicated. They've figured out how to do this huge mega-spell thing that will basically fix the Brynn barrier..." Agent Roberts began to say, but was interrupted.

"I thought they were here to fix the Southseid barrier." Agent Fastbeck said honestly.

"While that's true, the interconnectivity of the barriers makes it necessary for us to involve all of them. Now it turns out that there's this really big job that can be accomplished by using the magic of the three barriers combined. It'll take everything and everyone that we've got to do it, but if we can pull it off, with one simple casting we'll have the opportunity to resolve all the barrier problems in one go." Agent Roberts said seriously, then after a long thoughtful moment to review his statement, he turned to Paul and asked, "Am I oversimplifying it?"

"Hold on. I've got something." Paul said slowly as he closed his eyes.

Agents Roberts and Fastbeck looked at Filipe inquiringly.

"I think something you just said might have triggered an idea." Filipe quietly explained, then slowly added, "Wait for it."

"The way you said that... 'one simple casting'..." Paul said slowly.

"Okay. Well, I know that 'simple' is kind of a relative term. I'm sure that it's actually anything but." Agent Roberts admitted.

"No, no. I get what you're saying, and you're right. Even though the spell may not be simple, as in 'short and sweet', the *concept* behind the spell really is... or at least I think that it could be." Paul said slowly and seemed to be peering into a distant place that only he could see.

After a long moment, Paul finally continued, "The way you said that... it sounds like what we're going to be doing is a recasting...I mean, instead of changing the things that don't work and adding the new things that we need it to do, it would be more like an overall casting of a simple definition of each barrier to get rid of any glitches or snags that might have crept in over time from all the fixes and patches that everyone's done."

"Kind of like reinstalling an operating system?" Agent Fastbeck hazarded to guess.

"Yeah. Just like that." Paul confirmed.

"What about the changes that were just made?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"We can include them. In fact, it's probably the *best* way to fully incorporate the changes into the existing barriers. If you'll hang on here for a minute, I need to talk to Professor Everstone. I think you might have just figured out how we can make all of this work." Paul said excitedly before dashing away.

"Happy to help." Agent Roberts said in a slightly bewildered tone.

* * * * *

"If Paul's talking about doing what I think he is, this is going to be *really* tough." Filipe said thoughtfully.

"How's that?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"It sounds like he's thinking about completely recasting a barrier spell, from beginning to end. Not only will something like that take a lot of time but it would take a scary lot of magic." Filipe said slowly.

"But with the way we were talking about distributing the magic among all those attending, would that make it more manageable?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"More like it makes it 'possible'. No witch alive could cast that big of a spell with the flood of magic that they needed to cast it, crashing in on them like that. It would wash them away. But having the magic divided and evened out like that, it could be accessed when it's needed but held back in reserve when it's not." Filipe said carefully.

"It sounds like something big, but I'm still not getting what you're talking about." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"If I'm getting what they're saying, they're talking about going through each of the barrier spells and recasting them from

beginning to end, redefining the terms of the spells..." Agent Roberts trailed off as Harry approached with a tray loaded with food.

"Is all this food for just four people?" Agent Fastbeck asked as Harry began to place plate after plate of food on their table.

"Actually, it's going to be food for *three* people if Paul doesn't hurry up and get his butt back over here." Filipe said hungrily.

"The kids woke up hungry this morning." Agent Roberts explained to Harry with a smile.

"You don't have any food in your house, do you?" Agent Fastbeck asked in sudden realization.

"None to speak of. But I wanted to thank you for helping me the last time I shopped. I cooked up that big chunk of meat that you had me buy and everyone loved it. I couldn't have done it without your help."

"I'm glad it worked out for you." Agent Fastbeck said as his plate was placed before him.

"Professor Everstone said that he'd think about it." Paul said as he quickly scooted into his chair.

"Thanks Harry. Everything looks wonderful." Agent Roberts said sincerely, not only to thank Harry, but also to remind the boys that they weren't free to speak about certain things at the moment.

He needn't have worried. Before Paul had come to a complete stop, he had his fork out and was shovelling in the food.

"I know how hungry camping can make you. I hope you guys are having fun out there." Harry said with a smile at the boys' enjoyment, then added, "I've got a lot more food to deliver. Make sure to call me if you need anything."

"I think we're set for a while." Agent Roberts said as he watched Paul and Filipe, focused on their food to the exclusion of all else.

"Yeah. Thanks, Harry. This looks really great." Agent Fastbeck added.

When Harry stepped away, Agent Roberts and Agent Fastbeck exchanged a look before digging into their own breakfasts, at a far more reasonable pace.

* * * * *

There was little talk over breakfast except for the occasional comment about how good the different foods were. Apparently, Harry and his father had outdone themselves on the biscuits. They were as near to perfection as it was possible to get.

As the boys slowed their eating, Agent Fastbeck finally asked, "So what are we doing next?"

"My guess would be that we need to go somewhere to do a little planning. Not only are we going to have to debate the merits of Paul's new plan, but as I understand it, there's also going to be a lot of 'crafting' that will need to be done in advance. I would assume that that's going to have to be done at all three sites." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"And we need to find the vinculum chamber." Paul said between bites.

"Right." Agent Roberts confirmed, then said to Agent Fastbeck, "We need to get a map that shows all three barrier sites so that we can triangulate to find the most likely location of some kind of chamber or something. It might end up being important."

"I have some maps at the office. We could go and do that right now, if you wanted." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

"I wouldn't want for everyone to have to wait on us and it looks like they're nearly finished." Agent Roberts said uncertainly.

Just then, Harry walked up to their table, carrying a heavily laden tray.

"Dad thought that you guys might like a little something special to finish off the meal." Harry said as he began placing enormous gooey cinnamon rolls at each place setting.

"There's no possible way I could even *think* about eating more." Agent Roberts said as he reflexively backed away.

"I'll eat yours." Paul immediately volunteered.

Agent Fastbeck looked from his cinnamon roll to Filipe's wide hungry gaze and asked, "You got this, Filipe?"

"Uh huh." Filipe said with a grin.

"Enjoy your cinnamon rolls and we'll be back in a few minutes." Agent Roberts chuckled as he stood.

"If we get caught up in something, just come over to the office and get us." Agent Fastbeck said as he got up more slowly.

Both boys were eating with renewed vigor to finish the last of their breakfasts before attacking the surprise treats that they had been given.

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"So, what else do I need to know?" Agent Fastbeck asked as they walked.

"Well, with everything still up in the air, whatever I tell you is subject to change." Agent Roberts cautioned.

"Understood." Agent Fastbeck confirmed.

"In regard to you specifically, it looks like we're going to need you to go to the Southseid barrier and talk to the Wudewas for us. What we'd like to do is get a nature-based spellcaster to lead a small group of Wudewas to unlock the magic of their land so that it can be used to recast the spell on their barrier." Agent Roberts carefully explained.

After a moment to consider, Agent Fastbeck said, "That shouldn't be a problem."

"When it comes time for the actual spellcasting, we're probably going to need you present to allow the witches access to the barrier. That part's not for sure yet." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"So are you going to have to be present at the Brynnhollow barrier to serve the same function?" Agent Fastbeck asked curiously.

"Maybe. But if at all possible, I'd like to be with my team so that I can keep an eye on Dex. I feel an added responsibility for him due to the promise I made to his father." Agent Roberts said in a conflicted tone.

"It looks like neither of us is going to have the luxury of doing what we want to. I'd much rather be in Brynnhollow overseeing that everything is going to plan there." Agent Fastbeck said honestly.

"I hadn't thought of that. You practically have a family there, don't you?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"If anything were to go wrong... I don't know what I'd do." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"Worst case scenario, it doesn't work and we have to remake the barriers. Right?" Agent Roberts asked, trying his best to sound optimistic.

Agent Fastbeck didn't answer as he opened the outer door and held it for Agent Roberts.

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Once they were inside the office, Agent Roberts quietly asked again, "Right?"

"We're going to be dealing with extreme levels of power on a massive scale. I'm not saying that something 'explosive' is possible but... well... no one really knows, do they?"

"I guess not." Agent Roberts quietly admitted.

"How sure are you that doing all of this is necessary?"

"From what I can tell, these updates and upgrades need to be done, regardless of who does them. If we do them ourselves, then we have at least some small measure of control over the situation and the outcome. If we choose not to do them, then the next people who try may approach it from a very different perspective. They may not care about the people in the barrier communities... or the people of Waxell. They may make more 'convenient' decisions because they aren't worried as much about the consequences." Agent Roberts carefully explained.

"So putting it off will make it more likely that the people we care about will be harmed."

"Not only that. If we don't do it now, what happens if one of the communities is attacked or discovered due to our inaction? We would be entirely responsible for whatever happens to them."

"I see your point. What do you suggest we do next?"

"Get out the map and see if the central point is somewhere that we can reach it."

"Clear off your desk." Agent Fastbeck said as he walked into his office.

* * * * *

"Just how old is this thing?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked at the map in wonder.

"How should I know? This is the best map I could find with all the locations on it."

"Right. So how do we do this?"

"Find the three locations on the map, then draw a line from each one to exactly between the other two. Where the three lines intersect should be our center point."

"Sounds right, although finding the three locations on a map this old might be a challenge."

"Even compared to everything else that's going on?"

"Never mind."

* * * * *

"Okay. We've found the location. Now what?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"Now we find the same location on the current map and see what's there."

"Sorry. I thought it was the literal middle of nowhere."

"Back when this map was drawn, it was. Now... help me get the current map laid out."

"I'm trying. This thing seems to have a mind of its own."

"Do your best. I've got my hands full keeping the old map in place."

Agent Roberts was surprised when a pair of dark semi-transparent hands began helping to smooth out and hold down the map.

"What the hell is that?" Agent Fastbeck asked suddenly.

"Do you remember me telling you about how I had my shadow stolen?"

"Yes. I remember that." Agent Fastbeck responded slowly.

"I got him back... That's him." Agent Roberts said simply.

"While I would like to discuss that entire event with you, I think it can wait for a while. For right now, I'd just like to know how and why your shadow is able to act independently from you."

"Magic." Agent Roberts said simply.

The withering look Agent Fastbeck turned on him was epic in its proportions.

"Look. Before you get too worked up about this, please try to keep in mind that nothing that happened here was my shadow's fault."

"How's that?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"He was hanging out, minding his own business, then all of a sudden he was ripped away from me. When that happened, I guess he sort of 'woke up' and fought to defend himself. Because of that, when he came back to me, he was a little more self-aware than when he left."

"I guess I can see that."

"Okay. So now that he's back with me, I'm not going to try and force him to be like he was before. We've talked and he's agreed not to show himself in public or around people who don't already know about him. But when we're at home or in the right company, he can come out and take part in events if he wants to."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Yeah. I really am."

"Alright then. As long as you're at peace with the way things worked out, I have no reason to have a problem with it."

"Good. Now what are we looking at here?"

"Let me see." Agent Fastbeck said as he peeled back the edge of the newer map to look at the markings on the older one.

Agent Roberts backed away slightly and watched what Agent Fastbeck was doing.

He glanced to his side and noticed that his shadow had taken on a three dimensional form and was standing beside him, exactly mirroring his pose.

Agent Fastbeck laid the newer map flat again. As he did, both Agent Roberts and his shadow placed their hands back on the map to hold it in place.

Agent Fastbeck traced his finger along the map, as he said, "Based on the landmarks, I'm pretty sure that the central point that we're looking for is right around here."

"Where is it?" Agent Roberts asked as he and his shadow leaned closer to see.

"It looks like the point where the lines cross is smack dab on top of the Old Tennyson place."

Chapter 37

"Everyone's done with breakfast. We're just waiting on you guys." Zanner said as he walked into the office with Dex following closely behind.

"What do you want to do?" Agent Roberts asked as he continued looking at the map. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that his shadow had immediately 'gone flat' to blend in with the naturally occuring shadows in the room.

"From the sound of it, a lot of decisions are going to have to be put on hold until we've investigated what, if anything, is at the Tennyson place." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"Yeah. That sounds about right. But don't we need a warrant before we go searching someone's private property?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"There are ways around that." Agent Fastbeck said with a sly grin, then held up one finger to indicate the need for silence as he dialed the phone.

"Just a minute, boys. We need to check on something before we'll know what we're doing next." Agent Roberts said quietly as he looked at Agent Fastbeck uncertainly.

"Ethyl? Do you happen to know if there's a way to get in touch with Warren Tennyson right now?"

After a moment of listening, Agent Fastbeck smiled and said, "Yes. Thank you Ethyl. You help us out so much that we're going to have to look into making you an honorary agent."

Agent Fastbeck chuckled at her response, then became more serious as he said, "Warren? This is Agent Fastbeck from the FBI. I was wondering if you'd mind if we went onto your property this morning to check something out."

"No, no, it's nothing like that. I'm talking about your family property outside of town."

"You don't have to be there unless you want to be, we just need to look around for a few minutes to follow up on a lead."

"I promise, if we find anything out of the ordinary, we'll let you know all about it."

"No. We won't be spending the night, in fact, we'll probably just be there for a few minutes."

"Thanks, Warren. Probably nothing will come of it, but it's still best if we take a look. Bye." Agent Fastbeck said before hanging up the phone.

"So, what's the plan?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"We'll drive over and investigate the Old Tennyson place, then you can go back and report on what we found while I wait here at the office until I'm needed for something."

"Are you feeling left out?"

"Not at all. I'm just aware that at some point I'm probably going to be called into action. Until then, I need to stay where people will know to find me."

"Makes sense. But with all the magic whipping around this place, wouldn't it be a good idea for us to have someone magical going along with us?"

"From the sound of it, everyone has things that they need to be working on right now. Besides, we're two highly trained and qualified federal agents. If there's something to find, I'm confident that we'll find it."

"Okay." Agent Roberts reluctantly agreed, then added, "And if we *do* find something magical, then we'll know what kind of specialized help we need to ask for, to investigate it further."

"Boys, why don't you tell the others to go on without us. Agent Roberts and I are going to investigate the central location that you've been speculating about." Agent Fastbeck said decisively.

"Are you sure that you don't want us to go with you, just in case you need some magical help?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Let us figure out what we're dealing with first. We'll catch up with you and let you know what we've discovered as soon as we can." Agent Fastbeck explained.

"Okay. But remember that we need you guys. Without you, we can't get into two of the barriers." Zanner urged them to understand.

"All of us are needed. And all of us have different jobs to do. It's time for us to go and do ours." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"Are you going to the Protectorate as soon as you're done?" Dex asked cautiously, directing his question to Agent Roberts.

"Yes. That's the plan. But as I'm sure you've noticed, all plans are subject to change. We'll just have to wait and see what happens next."

"Don't worry. All we're probably going to find when we get to the Tennyson place is just a typical haunted house." Agent Fastbeck said with a grin.

"Agent Roberts, remember that if Agent Fastbeck tells you that you need to split up and search separately, not to listen to him. If I've learned anything from watching horror movies, it's that when you're investigating someplace haunted, you need to stick together." Zanner said firmly.

"I'll keep that in mind. Now we'd better get going. We've all got things to do." Agent Roberts said firmly.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts was surprised when Agent Fastbeck decided that they would be taking separate vehicles, but when Agent Fastbeck

explained that they would probably be going in opposite directions when they left the Old Tennyson Place, he couldn't help but agree with the reasoning.

The drive to the Old Tennyson Place was relatively short, but in some strange way it felt more isolated and solitary than the much longer trip out to the Southseid colony.

He vaguely noticed a graveyard and noted that it seemed to be reasonably well kept.

There had been no signs of inhabited homes along the neglected road, just derelict buildings every so often along the way.

Just as he had the thought, he passed another graveyard, this one appearing to be older and more neglected than the first.

A chill went up Agent Roberts' spine as he fought to bring his focus back to the matter at hand.

When they pulled onto the Tennyson property, Agent Roberts was surprised to find that the atmosphere was somehow impossibly more bleak and desolate than it had been on the road leading up to it.

As he finally pulled his car to a stop, he had to admit to himself that he really didn't want to get out. With the image of the graveyards fresh in his mind, it occurred to him that the place that he had found himself probably wasn't meant for the living.

Seeing Agent Fastbeck prompted him to do what he knew that he had to.

With more than a little dread, he finally screwed up his resolve and opened his car door.

* * * * *

"Are you telling me that people *chose* to build a house and live out here?" Agent Roberts asked as he approached.

"I guess so. Although I can't imagine why. What a life-sucking soul-destroying place." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"Do you have any idea of where we should start looking?"

"I think it would be best to walk the grounds for a few minutes to get a sense if this oppressive atmosphere covers the whole property or if it's just here, in front of the house."

"I guess so. Lead the way." Agent Roberts said unenthusiastically.

Agent Fastbeck seemed to be conflicted, but finally chose a direction and started walking.

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"Do you feel that?" Agent Roberts finally asked.

"It's like we just passed through a veil, everything seems perfectly normal here." Agent Fastbeck observed.

"Do you think it's intentional?"

"Probably. Stay sharp."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts looked around the area beside the weathered and worn house, but didn't recognize anything being out of place.

Agent Fastbeck continued to take the lead as he tentatively led the way around the corner.

Agent Roberts blinked to clear his vision as he looked through the back yard into an overgrown decorative garden.

"What do you see over there?" Agent Roberts asked as he pointed.

"Weeds grown up around an old broken down gazebo." Agent Fastbeck said frankly, then cautiously asked, "What do you see?"

"Probably the same thing that you do... except for a big gaping hole in reality that seems to lead directly into hell."

"Oh, is that all?"

"Do you remember back when something like this would be looked upon as being unusual."

"Yeah. Those were simpler times. Anyway, how many guesses as to where that thing leads?"

"I assume that it opens into the vinculum chamber that Paul's been talking about. But I think the bigger question might be, do we really want to go in there?"

"This is kind of a wasted trip if we don't."

"But can you feel that? It's even worse than the feeling in the driveway."

"Yes. I feel it too. But you still can't see anything?"

"I can't see anything out of the ordinary, but I feel like I'd rather do just about anything besides going anywhere near that gazebo."

"Would you mind giving it a try? I'm curious to know if someone who can't see it is capable of making themselves do it."

"That's worth checking out. Although it's not a foregone conclusion that *you'll* be able to enter it just because you can see the magic at work." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"I know. But I've been thinking that since this thing is being hidden in plain sight in the human world, that there must be a way for a normal human to access it.'

"Do you mean something like the passcode I use to enter the Southseid barrier?"

"That's possible. Those words, or a close approximation of them might be able to do it."

"Do what... exactly?"

"Open the vinculum chamber. If we can open it here, then it looks like we'll be able to solve a lot of problems at once."

"Such as?"

"First, let's see if it works before we think too much about that."

"Right. So, is there anything you can think of that I need to do before trying this?"

"I don't know... any last words?"

"Not funny. I'm used to listening to my instincts and every instinct that I have is telling me to get away and stay away."

"Same here. But we've still got to try."

"Okay. Here I go." Agent Fastbeck said reluctantly.

Agent Roberts watched silently as Agent Fastbeck stepped forward to the neglected structure that was in desperate need of a coat or five of fresh paint.

Just short of taking the final step, Agent Fastbeck backed away and said, "I can't make myself do it."

"Well, thanks for trying." Agent Roberts said regretfully.

"Maybe you'll have better luck since you can see the magic." Agent Fastbeck said as he looked around.

"'Maybe. But I wouldn't count on it." Agent Roberts muttered, then forced himself to follow exactly as Agent Fastbeck had done.

His panic shot up to new levels the closer he got to the gazebo.

Agent Roberts pushed and pressed and finally forced his unwilling body to attempt to take the last step across the threshold of the archway.

He was just barely able to feel something with his fingertips before his body overrode his mind and forced him to step back.

"No matter how it looks, there *is* a physical barrier there." Agent Roberts announced past heavy breathing.

"Are you alright?" Agent Fastbeck asked with concern.

"I will be. It just took everything that I had to be able to get that close to it."

"So, what do you suggest we do next?"

"I'm going to try the words, just like what we do when we're opening the barriers. I'm hoping that they'll work here too."

"I'm ready when you are." Agent Fastbeck said simply as he watched.

"I hope this thing isn't a red herring, put here to waste our time."

"It will work or it won't. But if it doesn't, I've got nothing left to try." Agent Fastbeck said honestly.

"It's still possible that there's a less obvious doorway somewhere else, maybe inside the house." Agent Roberts said frankly, then continued, "But if we can't make this thing work, I think the next step might be to bring Paul out here to see what he can do with it. He can not only see the magic within things, but he also has experience with portals. He'll probably be our best resource for dealing with this."

"Agreed. Are you ready to give it a try?"

"I guess I can't put it off any longer." Agent Roberts said quietly, then held one hand up, palm toward the sky as he called out, "*I call upon the powers-that-be to grant me entry to the sanctuary, I use the power granted by devils. I* ***am*** *the harbinger.*"

As soon as he had finished saying the words, he noticed a fluctuation in the magical mass in front of him. He stepped forward into the magical blur and found himself inside the gazebo.

The horrible sense of dread was conspicuously absent. As he looked around he noticed that although it was a bit dusty, the flooring seemed sturdy and was otherwise clear of debris.

"Well, it looks like you made it. Is everything alright?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

Just as Agent Roberts was about to answer, he noticed a rather bizarre sight. Looking back through the archway that he had entered through, he could clearly see Agent Fastbeck. But when he looked to his left, he saw a completely different landscape. From the dim lighting, the dense mist and abundance of foliage, he concluded that it was a doorway that led to the Wudewas territory.

"Is everything okay?" Agent Fastbeck asked with concern.

"Um, yeah." Agent Roberts said as he turned and saw that the next archway seemed to lead to a stone courtyard, bathed in bright sunlight.

Movement caught his attention, then he saw Agent Fastbeck step into the room with him.

"You didn't have to recite the words?"

"Apparently not. I guess when you opened the door, you opened it for both of us." Agent Fastbeck said thoughtfully, then cautiously asked, "What can you see?"

"Probably the same as you. Even though what I'm seeing is beyond belief, none of it has the shimmering magical qualities of an illusion."

"What I'm seeing is an eight-sided room with four doorways that lead to four entirely different places. I'm guessing that the Roman temple ruins are in the protectorate, since I can identify the other three doorways."

"Even though I haven't been to this exact location within the protectorate, the brightness and the climate seem right."

Agent Fastbeck stepped forward toward the temple ruins and reached out his hand before saying, "It looks like I won't be able to visit there."

"That doesn't make sense."

"What about *any* of this makes sense?"

"If you step back and look at it, most of these things seem to work with a certain logic."

"Then what would you suggest?"

"Maybe you should try opening the door before you try walking through it."

Agent Fastbeck considered for a moment, then shrugged before saying, "*In the name of Cernunnos I seek entry to the sanctuary entrusted to my care. I use the power granted by gods. I am the guardian.*"

"Nice." Agent Roberts absently commented as he watched Agent Fastbeck's hand move forward, through the bright archway.

"You're the one who knows this place. Want to introduce me to the natives?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he turned to look at his companion.

"I can't communicate with them like you do with the Wudewas, but I'll be happy to show you around."

"Come to think of it, maybe we'd better hold up on that. Now that we've figured out how to open the vinculum, the next thing we should probably do is verify that this thing works the way that we think it does." Agent Fastbeck said as he stepped through the archway.

"Right. It looks like this thing will let us travel directly to the different barriers. If all that we're assuming turns out to be true, then we can take this opportunity to discover where all the vinculum chambers are located so that we can show them to our teams."

"That's a good idea. But I think that you should go right now and let your team know where this one is. I'm in a much better position to deal with things in the other two barriers." Agent Fastbeck said thoughtfully.

"Agreed. I can't speak the Wudewas language and I don't have nearly the same relationship that you do with the Brynnhollow people."

"And I can fly." Agent Fastbeck reminded him, then continued, "I suppose that once we've completed our tasks, we can come back to the Waxell vinculum and pick up our cars."

"Thanks for thinking ahead on that. It might have been a long wait if you were my ride back to town."

"It'll probably be at least half an hour before the teams arrive at the barriers. If we leave right now, we'll have a good chance of catching them before they've become too invested in some other project. Are you going to be alright if I leave you here?"

"Yeah. I should be fine." Agent Roberts said, then noticed a burning sensation on his chest.

He reached inside his shirt and found that the pendant of his necklace was hot to the touch.

"Problem?"

"I think the demon flavored magic powering my charm might not be reacting well to the 'holy ground' surrounding us. I think it'll be okay. I just won't wear it directly against my skin." Agent Roberts said as he moved the charm outside his shirt.

"Maybe you should take it off." Agent Fastbeck cautiously suggested.

"No. This thing fuels my password and also allows me to see past illusions."

"Well, it's nice that you have something that you can remove if you don't want to deal with the burden."

"But it also means that it can be taken away from me relatively easily."

"I don't know if you've noticed the necklace that I wear, but it might hold the power for my password too." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"Standing here talking isn't getting either of us closer to our teams." Agent Roberts said, then looked back at the entry to the vinculum chamber before saying, "Let's do this."

Agent Fastbeck gave a firm nod of agreement, then started walking back to the archway.

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Agent Roberts was at a loss for which direction to go. While he was *technically* outside, since the sky was visible above him, he was actually in some sort of courtyard, walled in on all sides.

Coming to the conclusion that time was not on his side, he set off toward what appeared to be an exit.

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When he finally emerged from the courtyard of a ruined castle, he was at a loss for which way to go.

There were no identifying landmarks visible and while the sky seemed to be harshly bright, there was no actual sun in evidence to give him a clue as to compass directions.

The best he could do was follow what appeared to be a path to the nearest high ground.

The absolute silence that surrounded him was unnerving.

There was no sign that anyone had been there in recent decades... or possibly even centuries.

The path that he walked had been paved with bricks at some point in the distant past. However in the here and now only the occasional random patch of brickwork was exposed to the sunlight. The only other evidence that there had been a road at all was the fairly regular passage free of any stone obstructions or large trees.

As he crested a slight rise, he was relieved to see a familiar sight.

At the skyline he saw an impossibly shaped mountain which seemed to defy both logic and gravity. But more importantly in that moment, it was a landmark that he recognized from his initial visit.

He took a moment to get his bearings, then set off in a new direction toward where he estimated the entrance to the Protectorate to be.

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Although the landscape was uncomfortably bright, it wasn't overly warm.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, a growling and hissing sound caught his attention and he turned suddenly. As soon as he saw the monster towering over him, he smiled with nervous relief.

"Linnaeus, I'm glad to see you. How are you doing today?"

After a long confused moment, Linnaeus responded with an uncertain sound, something like a whine.

Agent Roberts laughed and said, "Yeah, you and me both. By the way, yesterday I met your demi-brother, Reaper."

Linnaeus looked at him uncertainly for a moment before slowly nodding.

"I'm just trying to get back to the entry gate." Agent Roberts said as he pointed in that direction, then continued, "I'd welcome the company if you'd like to walk along with me."

Linnaeus looked to where he was pointing, then back at Agent Roberts before slowly shaking his head.

"Okay. I understand if you already have plans..." Agent Roberts began to say but was interrupted when Linnaeus lifted him off the ground.

Agent Roberts fought against his years of training and instead listened to his instincts, which told him that Linnaeus didn't mean him any harm.

After some shifting around, Agent Roberts found himself being held, facing forward, with his back against Linnaeus' chest.

As Linnaeus started moving with insect-like grace, virtually gliding over the landscape, Agent Roberts said, "Thank you. I wouldn't have asked you to carry me, but I appreciate your help."

Linnaeus let loose a screechy little growl in response which Agent Roberts took to mean his acknowledgement.

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Thanks to the way that Linnaeus had chosen to carry him, Agent Roberts had an expansive view of the landscape that they were traversing and the trail that Linnaeus was following.

Agent Roberts was reasonably certain that, when called upon to do so, he would be able to lead the way back to the dilapidated castle. Admittedly, at a much, *much* slower speed.

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In what ended up being a matter of minutes, Linnaeus released Agent Roberts and placed him on the ground.

"Thank you, Linnaeus. I really appreciate your help."

Linnaeus made a wheezy sound which Agent Roberts took to be his timid chuckles.

"If all goes well, I'll see you again soon."

Agent Roberts then turned toward the empty path where he had seen Archdruid Highley open the passage back to the real world.

After a few long silent moments to recall the proper words, Agent Roberts took in a long slow breath to brace himself. Finally, he raised one arm and held his open palm toward the sky as he said, "*In the days of tribute, in the months of seeing, in the years of trial, in the centuries of pain, we persevere. I humbly ask that you grant entry to one who serves. I am the harbinger.*"

Agent Roberts felt immeasurable relief wash over him at the manifestation of the archway before him.

All that he had been going on were assumptions and best guesses. There was actually no reason, whatsoever, that that should have worked. But for whatever reason, the magic seemed to have behaved within the constraints that his limited understanding of such things had put into place.

After walking through the passage into a world that was dark and overcast, he turned and looked back into the golden bright world of 'The Protectorate'.

He saw that Linnaeus was watching and couldn't help but wave.

Linnaeus waved in response, then backed away from the opening.

Agent Roberts glanced around to ensure that he was well and truly standing within the 'real' world. Once he was sure that he was, he raised one open palm toward the sky and said, "*I, the harbinger, give thanks. I now ask to close what has been opened to protect our precious ones inside.*"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the archway and its accompanying path shimmered and seemed to collapse in on itself, eventually completely vanishing from sight.

No one was present, so Agent Roberts started off across the grassy field, toward the path that led up and out of the basin. As he went, he made note of the heavy gray sky above.

* * * * *

Upon reaching the parsonage, Agent Roberts knocked heavily on the rough hewn wooden door.

Just as he was about to give up and go to the church, the door opened, revealing Archdruid Highley, dressed in his everyday clothes.

"Agent Roberts? I wasn't expecting you until later. Has something happened?" Archdruid Highley asked cautiously.

"Yes. But as far as I can tell, all the things that have happened have the potential to work in our favor. Before the others arrive I need to talk to you, Reaper and Milo."

"Reaper?"

"Yes. He's one of the Nephilim... you have to know him. The child of the sword?"

"I believe I know who you're speaking of, although I can't recall if I've ever spoken with him directly. He's a member of the aristocracy and they usually deal with me through an intermediary."

"Do you know where to go to or who to talk to to get in touch with Reaper? What we're planning to do is going to take lots of help." Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"I can't be sure, since I've never set out looking for him before, but I should be able to manage."

"Good. Is Milo somewhere nearby? If possible, I'd like to talk to him first. If he refuses to help us, then the rest won't matter."

"Milo and Jen have been staying in the guest cottages. They're not far from here and they should be up by now."

"Let's go then. I'd like to get as much of this resolved as possible before the team gets here."

"So the boys aren't here with you?"

"Not yet. Mr. Hansen is driving them here right now. If you want to be here when they arrive, I suggest that we get moving."

"Milo's cottage is right this way." Archdruid Highley said as he moved with purpose to the rear door.

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After a short walk down a lush, overgrown path, Agent Roberts found himself at the front door of a smaller and a bit more primitive looking cottage.

Archdruid Highley knocked, then they waited.

"What's going on?" Milo asked cautiously as he opened the door a crack.

"Could you let us in? Agent Roberts needs to speak with you and time is something of an issue." Archdruid Highley said firmly.

"Oh. Yes, of course. I was just cleaning up after breakfast." Milo said as he opened the door and stood aside.

"Thank you, Milo. I wouldn't have shown up unannounced if it weren't important." Agent Roberts assured him.

"That's fine. Come in and have a seat while I finish this up."

"Before you do that, I have a very important question to ask you." Agent Roberts said intensely.

"Okay..." Milo said hesitantly as he picked up a dish towel and began drying his hands.

"If it came down to it, do you think that you could cast a spell to combine the magic of several different magical people and direct it to open a magical reservoir for us?"

"I don't know any spells like that."

"I didn't think that you would. But if someone *gave* you the spell, do you think that you could do it?"

"From the way I understand it, faerie magic isn't the same as the magic that witches use. Even though we can end up doing some of the same things, the way we manipulate magic is completely different."

"Forget about the spell for a minute. Just assume for the sake of argument that we can make that work."

"Okay."

"Do you think that you would be both willing and able to attempt a spell like that?"

"I don't understand what you're asking me."

"I'm asking you if you think that, given the correct spell to use, that you would be capable of performing a spell that channels and directs the magic of others to a specific purpose? Then, if the answer is yes, would you be willing to try?"

"What you're talking about sounds like it could be dangerous, I mean, tapping into a reserve of power sounds kinda big... are you sure that what you're planning is going to be worth the risk?"

"If we can pull this off, we're going to be recasting the spells for all three barriers at once. The thing is, we need a natural being to release one third of the magic that we'll be using to cast the new spells. That's why I'm asking you."

"But I'm only a half faerie." Milo cautiously warned.

"Paul's only a half demon and Reaper's only a half angel."

"You're going to ask Reaper to cast the spell with you?"

"I'm actually going to ask Reaper who of the Nephilim would be best suited to our needs. In my mind, I could see Reaper filling that role, but I have no idea if Reaper would be both willing and able."

"Why are you choosing to use mixed species beings to do the spellcasting?" Archdruid Highley asked cautiously.

"Because true beings of power can't exist in this world long-term." Milo answered for him, then quietly added, "Which is why my dad can't stay here with me in this realm."

"That's right." Agent Roberts confirmed, then explained, "And it also might be another failsafe to keep any one group from usurping the power held within the three barriers."

"Do you believe that this power was put into place for a circumstance such as ours?" Archdruid Highley asked curiously.

"It looks like this 'feature' of the barriers was put into place specifically so that people like us can do maintenance. Having this tool at our disposal gives us a chance to bring all three barriers completely up-to-date instead of just putting half-assed patches into place and hoping for the best."

"But do your people have the necessary skills to use the tool that you've been given?" Archdruid Highley asked cautiously.

Agent Roberts laughed at the question, then said, "It's not just us, you're part of this too. You, your brothers and all your followers who were blessed are going to be utilized as a magical holding pond so that the spellcaster won't be disintegrated by the surge of magic that we're going to release to him."

"But I'm just a normal human..." Archdruid Highley began to protest.

"Yeah, a normal human who has been touched by angelic magic, can talk with the inhabitants of the Protectorate and control the gate." Agent Roberts scoffed, then added more seriously, "If we can get everyone to agree to do this, it's going to take every single one of us giving it our all and probably pushing ourselves beyond anything that we ever thought we were capable of to make it work."

"Watch out what you wish for." Milo muttered anxiously.

"What was that?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"When Jarvis told me his vision about the boys, I made the mistake of wishing that I could be part of something big and important." Milo quietly admitted.

"Milo, you don't *have to* do anything. You're free to decline and we'll find some other way to make it work. If you don't think you're up to it, I mean either magically or emotionally, then I *want* you to back out." Agent Roberts said sincerely.

"How much do you know about faeries, Agent Roberts?" Milo asked quietly.

"I think I can honestly say 'absolutely nothing'." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"The reason that my parents met and I was born is because my father is powerful enough in his magic to breach the worldwalls and travel to this realm of his own accord. I have inherited his magic and I've even been able to teach myself some basic shadowmancy, which is a high level magic, regardless of which realm you're from. What I'm trying to say is that while I may not have the training or experience that some others do, I am stronger than average when it comes to raw magic."

"So... is that a yes?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"No one knows the power of wishes quite like a faerie. There's a distinct possibility that all of this could be my fault. Not only would it be selfish and wrong of me to refuse to help you, but I would also be betraying a granted wish. No one with a drop of faerie blood would ever dare to be so ungrateful. We know how the powers-that-be repay those who scorn their gifts."

"Which means..."

"Which means 'yes'. I'll help you however I can."

Chapter 38

"Good. Then Milo can finish up here while we go talk to Reaper." Archdruid Highley said thoughtfully.

"I'd rather wait so that Milo can join us. I'd like for him to be included in whatever happens next." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I've never been inside the Protectorate before. Do you think it'll be alright?"

"Absolutely." Agent Roberts said emphatically, then explained, "Faith is nice and everything, but I think that if this is going to have any chance of working, that you should see who and what you're going to be defending."

"Actually, that's one of the reasons that I haven't taken Jenn and Milo into the Protectorate before. After seeing it, they might decide that it would be better to let it be destroyed."

"Even so, I think that it's important."

"Good morning Shadow." Milo said cautiously.

Agent Roberts turned to see that his shadow had climbed up more than half of Milo's body and seemed to be in the process of engulfing him.

"Is he bothering you?" Agent Roberts asked hesitantly.

"Not at all. He's just saying good morning."

"If you're going with us, you'd better finish up what you were doing here." Agent Roberts suggested.

"There's nothing so important that it can't wait until I get back." Milo said simply, then cautiously asked, "Am I dressed alright?"

Archdruid Highley glanced at him, then said, "It's hard to say. The royals of the Nephilim choose to adhere to etiquette and protocol at

the strangest times. I suppose that, given the choice, you should probably err on the side of caution and wear your robes."

"Then I'll be ready in just a minute." Milo said quickly before dashing out of the room.

"Do you want to take the opportunity to slip into something less comfortable while he's doing that?" Agent Roberts asked with a grin.

"I probably should." Archdruid Highley said unenthusiastically.

"Milo and I will be along as soon as he's ready. Go on."

Although he was obviously less than thrilled by the development, Archdruid Highley nonetheless hurried away.

* * * * *

After about two minutes, Agent Roberts turned at the sound of movement and smiled when he saw Milo walking into the room, dressed in his robes.

"Jarvis went on ahead to change. We'll meet him at his house."

"Unless you had something else that you needed, I'm ready to go."

"Do you have an umbrella or anything? It looks like it could rain."

"I'm afraid that my umbrella had a rather unfortunate malfunction... or twelve. I'm planning to pick up a new one next time I'm in town."

"Hopefully the rain will hold off until we can reach the Protectorate." Agent Roberts said as he followed Milo out of the cabin.

"Are you saying that when it rains here, it doesn't also rain in the protectorate?"

"No. I don't think it does. Actually, as far as I know, it may not rain there at all."

"So, is it very different there?"

"I guess you could say that. The best description I can come up with is Persia... around the sixth century... BC... combined with equal parts Wonderland, OZ, and Narnia."

"That doesn't really tell me a whole lot."

"Don't worry about it. You'll see it for yourself in a little bit." Agent Roberts said with a grin, then his expression became more serious as he asked, "Is there anything we need to talk about while we've got the chance?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I just got the feeling that there might be things you'd rather not discuss in front of Jarvis." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"It looks like whether I want to or not, everything that I've kept hidden is going to be revealed."

"If you want to talk about it, I'll help if I can."

"There's actually nothing to talk about. I think you know everything that's important. I'm just so used to hiding that side of who I am that it feels really uncomfortable finally acknowledging it. He's always known about my faerie heritage, but I've hardly used any magic around him."

"Why not?"

"I guess that I wanted to be accepted for who I am, not for what magic I can do."

"That makes sense." Agent Roberts said honestly, then added, "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"Just, if you could, no matter what happens, try to keep in mind that I'm still me."

"Yeah. I can do that." Agent Roberts assured him.

* * * * *

After arriving back at the parsonage, it only took about a minute before Archdruid Highley had stepped outside to join them.

"Milo, when we get in there, you'll need to let me do the talking. You won't be able to speak their language." Archdruid Highley warned him as they walked.

"Reaper can make himself understood when he wants to." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Yeah. I talked to him when he came out of the Protectorate to look around." Milo helpfully added.

"Provided that we are able to meet with 'Reaper', what do you have planned for us to do next?" Archdruid Highley asked Agent Roberts cautiously.

"If all goes well, I think the next step should be for us to go to the vinculum chamber and make sure that you'll be able to open it."

"Vinculum chamber? What's that?" Milo asked curiously.

"It's a room that exists in several places at once. If it works the way we hope, it will allow us to perform the spell to make the stored magic of the meta-diagram available to be used."

"Is that where I'm going to be casting my spell?" Milo asked timidly.

"Yes. At least, that's the plan if everything works the way we expect it to."

* * * * *

Conversation stopped as the trio climbed down the steep walkway.

Once they were on flat ground again, none of them seemed to be inclined to pick up the conversation where they had left off.

The clouds overhead seemed to be darker and more ominous.

"In the days of tribute, in the months of seeing, in the years of trial, in the centuries of pain, we persevere. I humbly ask that you grant entry to one

who serves. I am the keeper." Archdruid Highley said toward the heavens as they stood in the open field.

"Just so you know, I was able to summon the arch to the protectorate, too." Agent Roberts said as he followed Archdruid Highley inside.

"But you haven't been granted the blessings of angels, have you?"

"No. But I've been given a magical gift by a demon."

"I would think, if anything, that that should *disqualify* you from entering the protectorate at all."

"To be honest, I opened the Brynnhollow barrier first, so that established that I was the Harbinger."

"Harbinger?"

"Yeah. Just like you're the Keeper and Conrad's the Guardian."

"So you think that once one of us has been established that we're automatically able to open all the barriers?"

"So far it seems that way."

Milo was silent as he walked with them, staring wide-eyed at the bizarre alien landscape.

"I don't understand why they would do that. Doesn't it defeat the purpose of a lock to hand out keys like that?"

"Well, I can think of two reasons why they'd do it this way. The first is, they might not have a choice. It's possible that they're restricted as to what they *can* do. In order for the lock to work at all they may need to install failsafes like this into the system."

"And the other reason?"

"The other might be the need for at least some pretense of trust among the groups being represented here. If we give someone the key, we trust them. Hopefully that will give them status as

ambassadors with the others so that they can travel from territory to territory."

Before they could say more, a familiar and welcome sight appeared before them.

"Reaper! I'm glad you're here!" Agent Roberts said happily.

"Linnaeus sought out Reaper, told of your presence." Reaper said pleasantly.

"You seem to be able to speak a lot better than you did before."

"The atunement has proceeded since our last meeting."

"Well, good." Agent Roberts said with a smile, then continued. "Reaper, you have already met my demi-friend, Milo. And I'm sure that you've at least heard of Archdruid Highley."

"Another demi-friend?"

"Sure. Why not?" Agent Roberts responded easily, then asked more seriously, "Would you have time to talk to us about renewing the barrier of the protectorate?"

"Yes. Such is destiny. Proceed."

Agent Roberts puzzled over the response for a moment, then carefully explained, "What we'd like to do is remake the barriers for all three colonies, all in one go. The only way to do that would be to tap into the magical reserves of the three colonies and direct it to our use."

Reaper gave a slow nod of understanding.

"We're here to ask you if either you, or someone you know and trust, could stand with us to release the power held within the land of the protectorate so that the witches can use it to remake the protectorate barrier."

"Some beings exist for a purpose. They are blessed... or cursed. Regardless, so shall I be too." Reaper said introspectively.

"Um... okay. So do you think you've got the magical ability to release the magic of the protectorate?"

"I have ability. What's more, I have understanding. This gathering of us to perform such a feat has in the past been referred to as The Assembly of the Magi."

"Magi? Like the three wise men?" Archdruid Highly asked in surprise.

"Yes, but no. In the common tongue, the word 'wise' does not relate the proper meaning. I don't know if such a word exists. The correct word to describe a Magi should convey the idea of being both magical and mundane; beings of otherworldly power attuned to this realm."

"I think we've got it. So since you know how an assembly of the Magi normally goes, do you happen to know what we're supposed to do next?"

"The three Magi must be of three 'kinds'."

"So far we've got a half-angel, a half-demon and a half-faerie. From everything we've been able to figure out, that should work."

"I should caution, having the proper 'kinds' is the least of the requirements. The spell may be spoiled by covetousness or obscene desire even though the participants appear to meet all requirements."

"So you all have to be of good character?" Agent Roberts asked thoughtfully.

"'Reasonable' character should be sufficient." Reaper assured him.

Agent Roberts glanced at Milo, then said with a grin, "Looks like you squeaked by on that one."

"Excuse me?" Milo said indignantly.

"You stole my shadow. I don't know if a person of 'good' character would do something like that."

"I explained why I did it and I apologized. I don't know what more you want from me." Milo said with annoyance.

"I want you to own it." Agent Roberts said simply.

"What do you mean by that?" Milo asked cautiously.

"I mean, every time we've talked about it, you've deflected the responsibility by saying a dozen different ways that it wasn't your fault. You did something to hurt and manipulate me. As soon as I believe that you honestly regret your actions, I'll stop bringing it up."

"Okay." Milo said quietly.

"Okay?" Agent Roberts asked uncertainly.

"I'll take a look at what I did and why I did it and when I'm to the point where I can be completely honest about my feelings on the matter, I'll share that with you so that we can bring this to an end."

"I'll look forward to that." Agent Roberts said sincerely.

"This is good." Reaper interjected, then continued, "It is required for the Magi to have support, both magical and mundane, to perform the release ritual."

"Well, from the way I understand it, we're planning on having Dex access the power of the earth. Zanner will summon that power and feed it to you. Archdruid Highley is the Keeper of the Protectorate, so he should be able to unlock the seal for you." Agent Roberts said seriously.

Reaper slowly nodded, then looked at Milo before asking, "What part does your demi-friend play?"

"Milo is a half-faerie and can cast spells with faerie magic. If we can make this work, he's going to be doing the same thing as you, except that he'll be doing it at the Southseid barrier."

"Before I do that, I'm going to need to know what spells we're going to be using. Faerie magic isn't the same as the magic of witches." Milo warned them.

"This, I can do for you. I believe that in this endeavor I shall be assuming the role of Melchior, the Magi of Arcane Knowledge."

"What does that make me?" Milo asked cautiously.

"From what has been said, and what I have witnessed, I believe that you will assume the role of Gaspar, the Magi of Volition."

"I have no idea what that means." Milo said honestly.

"Not to worry, demi-friend Milo, it is simply a general descriptor of your role in the ritual. It is who you already are, not who you are supposed to strive to be." Reaper assured him.

"Do you think that you'll be able to manage opening the seal on your own, or are you going to have to get a few of the other Nephilim to help you? I'm only asking because it seems that we're going to need to have equivalent amounts of power on all sides, so we're going to need to arrange that in advance, if we can." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"When the time comes to enact the ritual, we will see if more power or control is needed. In the past each of the Magi have been capable of performing the release ceremony unaided. But if others are needed to assist, they can be called upon."

"We've been assuming that the ceremony would be conducted at the vinculum chamber. Do you know if that's right?"

"Quite correct." Reaper confirmed, then added, "Your people have been able to uncover a surprising amount of information about the ceremony considering the obscurity of it."

"Most of that is thanks to Paul. He seems to have some sort of instinctive knowledge about these things, thanks to his demon heritage."

"You should be aware that the descendents of angels have an understandable distrust of those associated with demons. Although the evidence at hand suggests that you have been provided reasonable guidance, I would be reluctant to accept such information blindly."

"I don't know anything about trusting demons, but I trust Paul. He would never intentionally lead us astray." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"That being true, if the information he were given were incorrect, then he might in turn, however unintentionally, mislead us."

"Then I guess it's good that we'll have *you* on our side to let us know if what he's telling us doesn't sound right for some reason."

Reaper looked at Agent Roberts uncertainly.

When he noticed, Agent Roberts explained, "Forgive me if I don't completely trust what either one of you tell me. But by anyone's measure, I would be irresponsible if I did. Distrusting people is part of my job description."

After a moment to consider, Reaper smiled and said, "You are forgiven Friend-Shawn. I understand and concur. I can only promise that to the best of my knowledge, the information given me is true."

"Should we go to the vinculum chamber now? It seems like it's going to be the center of what we're going to be doing next." Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Although I know of the location of the chamber, none within the protectorate are capable of unlocking it for our use."

"Don't worry about that. Conrad and I already figured it out. I can open it for you." Agent Roberts said as he indicated the path before them.

"Of course. I hadn't considered the utility of the mundane person required for the ceremony. That would explain the requirement." Reaper said from Agent Roberts' side.

"Yeah. Well, I just hope you don't expect me to do too much more than opening the door because that's about all the tricks I know."

"You'll have to show me what to do if I'm going to be expected to perform the same duty." Archdruid Highley said honestly as he and Milo followed along, side-by-side.

"It's basically the same thing you already do to open the entry archway. You just modify the words a little to state what you want to happen."

"Friend Shawn, if I may ask, do I understand correctly? Did you and another personally witness the opening of the vinculum chamber?" Reaper asked curiously.

"I guess you could say that. That's how I got here. I entered the vinculum chamber in Waxell and exited it here." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Wait. What?" Archdruid Highley asked confusedly.

"The way I understand it, the vinculum chamber is a point of bilocation... or multi-location." Agent Roberts carefully explained. "You can enter it from different places around the area, but all the archways feed into the same big room."

"Although we are each our own group unto ourselves, collectively we are stronger and more able to resist outside forces that might threaten us." Reaper said sagely.

"Yeah. And having the colonies in such close proximity to each other makes it less likely that the 'real' world can gain a strong foothold."

"I have a feeling that there's more to it than that." Archdruid Highley said slowly.

"Of course there is. I know for a fact that there are government officials who work to protect this place. Beyond that, there's something magical going on to keep Waxell adrift in time."

"I wasn't aware that there was so much going on outside the protectorate."

"If you keep yourself sequestered from the world like you do, you're not likely to know what's going on outside."

"I've done my best to follow in my father's footsteps, but I guess that I don't have his contacts outside the protectorate."

"Or his charisma." Milo muttered under his breath.

Archdruid Highley glanced ruefully in Milo's direction, but didn't dispute his words.

"It sounds like your father is a... 'colorful' person who has found ways to capitalize on his strengths."

"Yeah. That sounds like a fair assessment of him."

"Now it's up to *you* to protect this place and these people. Your father doesn't enter into it. You've seen what worked for him, but now it's time to find out what works for you."

"While I agree with the sentiment, I can't see what that has to do with what we're doing now."

"We're embarking on something big and new. If you're going to step up and take charge of the situation, now would probably be the best time to do it. Think about it, when everything is quiet and at rest, there's resistance to any change. When things are in motion, it takes little effort to nudge them in the direction of your choosing."

"From what I've observed, you've taken on more of a leadership role than anyone else."

"Yes. So far, I've been doing my best to coordinate things since I have a unique vantage point. But eventually I'm going to be leaving, so now would be a good time for you to position yourself as leader so there won't be a power vacuum when I have to go."

"Although I can see what you're saying, I don't know what you want me to do."

"I'm suggesting that you set yourself up to take over when I'm done here. Learn about how and why everyone is doing what they're doing. When people have questions, be sure that you've positioned yourself to be seen as the guy with the answers."

"It would be difficult to see myself like that."

"If you can pull this off, you'll probably surprise a few people. But it's now or never. Scrape up everything you've got and make it happen."

"Friend-Shawn speaks truth. Today you begin to be what you will someday truly become."

"Look over there, can you see that castle?" Agent Roberts asked as their path led them to the top of a small hill.

"That's the abandoned castle. I've never been there. I've always been told that it's a dangerous place that I should avoid." Archdruid Highley warned.

"The danger is real. The castle of origin is claimed by all, though held by none. It was the lone structure that existed when we arrived in this place that was created for us." Reaper said quietly as they continued to walk.

"If that's the case, why doesn't anyone live there?"

"The very land calls out a warning to us to stay away. None can endure the assault of it for any length of time."

"Of course. We had the same thing at the Old Tennyson Place in Waxell. The feeling of dread was so thick that you could barely get past it." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"You said that the castle was like that when you got here. Where did you come here from?" Milo asked curiously.

"Midian." Reaper answered simply.

"Is that the same Midian that's mentioned in the bible?" Archdruid Highley asked cautiously.

"Yes and no. The place we lived before is much like this one, magically isolated and secluded from the world of men. When your people speak of Midian, they refer to a mythical place. Where we come from is that place which the myth was based upon." Reaper explained.

"So you and your people have always been kept confined like this?" Agent Roberts asked thoughtfully.

"The steps that have been taken were born of necessity. Even so, in the fullness of time our society fractured. I'm sure if you asked those who remained behind, they would say that we were exiled for our radical beliefs. However, we regard ourselves as the visionaries and pioneers who went out into the world to live free... or at least under our own governance."

"So there are other Nephilim back in Midian?" Milo asked curiously.

"We assume so. Although it is entirely possible that they might have found a way to destroy themselves in the subsequent millennia." Reaper said quietly.

Before Agent Roberts could formulate a response, Reaper continued, "Our civilization divided into thirds along ideological lines.Two groups with diametrically opposed radical beliefs chose to move away and start their own colonies, to prove that theirs was the preferred way of life. Those who didn't share in the beliefs of either stayed behind."

"How did that end up working out for you?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"We haven't heard anything from our brethren since we departed, so we can only speculate. But I prefer to believe that each group ended up making their perfect world, based on how they believed a society should be structured."

"Do you believe that about your society?" Archdruid Highley asked hesitantly.

"While the choices made by individuals might not always lead to the most favorable results, the philosophy that we live with allows us the freedom to achieve what we desire or simply to enjoy what is."

"But it has always seemed to me that the 'royals' of the Nephilim are constrained by endless conflicting rules governing protocol and decorum."

"Yes. But that is simply due to the fact that it pleases us to participate in such things. We are free to withdraw and pursue other endeavors, should it please us to do so."

"Do you mean that my father and I did all that bowing and scraping for no good reason?"

"Perhaps. But you are not us. If you wish to interact with us, you must do so on our terms. Likewise, if we should come to you to ask something of you, we would do our best to do so in a manner that is respectful to your ways and customs."

"But you've never asked anything of us."

"That does not invalidate the premise."

"I suppose not." Archdruid Highley conceded.

"When we get there, are you going to be expecting me to do something?" Milo asked anxiously.

"Actually, getting you there is pretty much my whole plan. Everything after that is going to be left to those who are a little more magically inclined." Agent Roberts admitted.

"Friend-Shawn, you are responsible for calling an Assembly of the Magi. You have achieved something that no other being has in a thousand years."

"It wasn't just me!" Agent Roberts immediately said in his defense.

"Perhaps not, but I get the feeling that none of this would have happened without *you*." Archdruid Highley said sincerely.

"Okay. But just stop talking about it. We've still got a lot to do and we can't afford to be distracted going into it." Agent Roberts said sharply.

"As you say, Friend-Shawn." Reaper said with a note of tenderness under his words.

* * * * *

"Is anyone else having difficulty breathing?" Archdruid Highley asked as they started walking down into a valley.

"The hair is standing up on my neck." Milo said anxiously.

"That's the feeling that Reaper and I were telling you about. You know, the thing about 'the land calling out to stay away'?"

"I couldn't have described it better myself." Archdruid Highley said as he looked around nervously.

"If you can just push past the uncomfortable feeling until we get inside, it'll be okay."

"I don't know if I'll be able to do it." Milo quietly admitted, then explained, "Even though I do my best to live in the human world, at the core, I'm still a creature of instinct."

"If it's too bad for you I can try going on ahead and shutting it down for you. When I open the door, it lets up."

"Okay. I'll try." Milo promised.

"It'll be fine. We'll all help you." Agent Roberts assured him.

* * * * *

"It's just up ahead. How are you guys doing?" Agent Roberts asked as he led the way into the courtyard.

"Now I understand why no one lives here. This is horrible." Archdruid Highley said frankly.

"Agent Roberts? I don't think I can force myself to go any farther." Milo said weakly.

"Do you see that archway right over there? That's it. As soon as we pass through, the feeling will go away." Agent Roberts said carefully, then asked, "Will you try?"

"Yeah." Milo rasped with determination.

"Good. Thank you, Milo." Agent Roberts said, giving evidence of his respect and admiration through his voice and expression.

Although Agent Roberts was anticipating the psychological attack and knew for a fact that it was about to end, he still had to struggle to continue on.

"Are you absolutely certain that it's necessary for us to do this?" Archdruid Highley asked loudly, as though he were trying to be heard over a howling wind.

None of the others noticed his shouting since they were each fighting their own battles.

"Yes. Keep going. We're almost there." Agent Roberts assured him as he saw the magical flow of the archway.

As soon as Agent Roberts determined that he was near enough to the arch, he stopped and raised one palm toward the sky as he said, "*I call upon the powers-that-be to grant me entry to the sanctuary, I use the power granted by devils. I* ***am*** *the harbinger.*"

He could see as well as feel the change in the archway before him.

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he stepped forward to take the final step.

Stepping through the archway brought immeasurable relief.

Agent Roberts immediately turned and saw as Reaper passed through the archway.

"Are you alright?"

"I can only imagine how you were able to enter this chamber without encouragement."

"Actually, I was showing off for my boss." Agent Roberts said, then reached forward to take Archdruid Highley's arm to stabilize him as he walked through the arch.

"Thank you." Archdruid Highley said shakily.

"It's better in here. Just take a minute to collect yourself." Agent Roberts said as he released Archdruid Highley's arm and turned to help Milo through the arch.

The look on Milo's face was nothing short of complete terror. He seemed to be a heartbeat away from completely losing any semblance of emotional control.

Before Agent Roberts could do anything to help the frightened man, his shadow took on a fully three-dimensional form and stood forward to pull Milo into a firm hug.

There was a long moment of silence as the shadow expressed caring and compassion entirely through touch.

"Friend-Shawn?" Reaper asked uncertainly.

"Hmm?"

"I admit that me and my people don't have current knowledge of humans, but this is out of the ordinary... is it not?"

"Yeah. But it's not something dangerous. I promise." Agent Roberts said as he kept careful watch on what his shadow was doing.

"Agent Roberts. What are we seeing here?" Archdruid Highley asked as he stared wide-eyed at the drastically different landscapes being displayed through each of the four arches.

"We're in a room that exists in four places simultaneously. If we're going to unlock the magic stored in all the barriers, this is where we're going to have to do it." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Thank you, Shadow. I'm better now." Milo said quietly.

Agent Roberts' shadow slowly released Milo from their embrace, then held one insubstantial hand against Milo's cheek for a moment before becoming two-dimensional and resuming his appearance as a typical shadow.

"Are you going to be okay?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

After a moment to consider, Milo finally said, "I think that I'll be alright, I just don't know what to think about what just happened."

"It's easier to manage the second time. It's no less intense, but at least you have a better idea of what to expect." Agent Roberts assured him.

At Milo's look of confusion, Agent Roberts elaborated, "That was my second time walking through it and it was easier to make myself do it this time."

"Oh that! I was talking about being held and comforted by Shadow." Milo explained.

After a moment to consider, Agent Roberts finally said, "Actually, the same thing probably applies to both situations."

Chapter 39

"So, if I get what you're saying, this is where the spell is going to be cast. Is that right?" Milo cautiously asked.

"The one you're taking part in, yes." Agent Roberts confirmed, then explained, "Somehow in establishing this multi-locational space where we can jump from one barrier to the next, they also created a magical reservoir where the created earth, water and air can be stored and distributed to all three barriers as needed. Casting the spell here has the best chance of working the way we want it to."

"So it's going to be me, Reaper and... who else?" Milo asked hesitantly.

"Paul. You know him, he's the one who sprouted horns when you first met us."

"Oh yes. I remember him. In fact, I have no doubt that I'll be remembering him for years to come... in my nightmares."

"Yep. That's him. Using the demonic power which is his heritage, he's going to help us release the magic of the barriers so that the witches can use that magic to bring all the barriers completely up-to-date."

"Demi-Friend Milo, we are each beings who hold some measure of power. We are being asked to use that power for the good of all. As Magi, I provide knowledge, and so will I do for you."

"Thanks." Milo said appreciatively, then cautiously asked, "But what do I provide?"

"The will for it to be so." Reaper answered simply.

"Hold on. Are you saying that if Milo doesn't want for this to be done... then it won't be? Just like that?" Agent Roberts asked hesitantly.

"Such is the role of Gaspar."

"I think I can see what you mean about wishes." Agent Roberts told Milo frankly.

Milo slowly nodded in response.

"What is Paul going to provide?" Agent Roberts slowly asked.

"The role of the Magi Balthasar is to provide the structure and mechanics of the spell." Reaper said simply.

As soon as the words were spoken, Agent Roberts recalled the diagrams that Paul had made while enchanting his pendant.

"Paul is the perfect person for that. He has some really useful skills." Agent Roberts said sincerely.

"I had hoped it would be so. My knowledge is of what has happened or what should happen. I have no knowledge of what currently is beyond what I have witnessed while in your company." Reaper said frankly.

"There's something I don't understand..." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Please ask. I am here to impart Arcane knowledge." Reaper said simply.

"To me, it seems like we're missing something. Even though I've never studied magic, I've always heard about using the 'four' elements to make magic work. Since I've been here, I've only heard about three."

"Each element plays a role in the spellcasting. Perhaps the absence of the fourth element plays just as significant a role."

"Perhaps?"

"The only arcane knowledge passed down to me on the subject is that the assembly is of three. There is no role for a fourth."

"Why not?"

"I do not have that answer."

"That seems strange. Why wouldn't you have the answer to such an obvious question?"

Reaper appeared to be uncomfortable and finally admitted, "Although we are Magi, we are still not fully trusted. There are certain things we are not told or are not given so that we cannot attempt to gain the power unto ourselves."

Agent Roberts slowly nodded in realization, then said, "It makes sense. That way no one can compel you to allow them access to the power. Each of you are given pieces of the puzzle, but you need to fit them together naturally and deliberately to make anything out of them. And if someone tries to force them together, they won't fit right."

"Thank you, friend-Shawn. You assume the best of us, perhaps better than we assume of ourselves."

"I'm still plenty distrusting. But I can also accept the possibility that people might choose to bring their best selves forward when given a compelling reason to do so."

"I need to learn to do that. Trusting people, I mean. It sounds like a much happier way to be." Milo said quietly.

"Not always. Sometimes people disappoint you. To me, the good days outweigh the bad ones." Agent Roberts said frankly, then

thought to add, "I guess it also depends on the type of people you surround yourself with."

"Now that we're here, in the vinculum chamber, what do we need to do next?" Milo asked cautiously.

"I'm leaving that to the practitioners of magic. I got you here, so as far as I'm concerned, my part is done." Agent Roberts announced.

"But what are we supposed to do?" Archdruid Highley asked anxiously.

"You've got Reaper here to tell you 'what' needs to be done. You've got Milo to tell you 'why'. It wouldn't surprise me if Paul showed up in the next few minutes. If he does, then you've got the one who knows 'how'."

"That still doesn't tell us what we need to do next." Milo said seriously.

"Listen. You have everything you need at the moment. I don't need to be here right now. I have a feeling that there's something else that I need to be doing, so I'm going to go start doing it."

"But you don't have any idea what it is?"

"No. In fact, it might be something as simple as me not being here. But whatever it is, I've got to go."

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts stepped through the archway, a sudden movement out of the corner of his eye drew his attention. He looked just in time to see a young teenage boy duck around the corner of the house.

The gazebo was some distance away, so Agent Roberts did his best to move quickly and silently through the tall grass.

Regardless whether he believed the boy to be a threat or not, his training dictated that he draw his weapon and be ready to use it.

Upon reaching the side of the house, he inched his way toward the corner.

When he was just a few steps from the point where he had seen the boy, he stopped and firmly called out, "This is Agent Shawn Roberts from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Please step out here where I can see you and identify yourself."

"Don't shoot." The boy said shakily as he stepped out from behind the corner with his hands raised.

The boy couldn't be more than fourteen years old. Agent Roberts determined that the boy posed absolutely no threat at all.

"It's just me and my grandpa." The boy said fearfully.

"Where is your grandfather?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"He's right here. He's got a walker and the tall grass slows him down." The boy explained.

Agent Roberts stepped forward and saw the elderly man slowly approaching, just as his grandson had said.

Agent Roberts finally lowered his weapon, then asked more gently, "What are your names and what are you doing out here?"

"I'm Kirwin Tennyson and this is my Grandpa Stephen."

"I'm guessing that you're relations of Warren's. I talked to him earlier but he didn't say anything about anyone else being out here."

"He called me and told me that you were coming." Grandpa Stephen said as he slowly approached.

"Then you already know that I have permission to be here." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"Which one are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You came out of the gazebo just now, didn't you? From all that I've ever heard, only three people can do that. Which one of them are you?"

"The harbinger."

"Hail and well met, harbinger of the coming age. Those of my bloodline have been given the honor of attending to the Waxell Gate." Stephen said formally.

"Yeah. Thanks." Agent Roberts said slowly, then couldn't help but ask, "But why isn't Warren out here with you?"

"The contract of our bloodkin appears to have skipped a generation with him. I attempted to force him into the role by passing conservatorship of the property over to him, but that didn't accomplish anything good. I'm too old to carry out the duties and Kirwin's still too young, but even so, when the call came, we answered it. Maybe between us we'll be able to manage."

Agent Roberts tentatively accepted the explanation, then cautiously said, "We'll find a way to make it work. But for right now, I need to know what you know about what's going on here. Everyone that I've talked to so far has different pieces of the puzzle. Maybe your piece is the one I need to get all of this to make sense."

"And unto the harbinger I shall say, worry not for the matters of which thou hast no influence. Seek balance. Trust in thine own mind." Steven said distantly.

"Um. Okay. I kinda figured most of that out on my own, but it's good to know that I'm on the right track." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"Do what you need to do and we'll attend to the gate."

"Yeah. I'll do that." Agent Roberts said confidently, then added, "Don't be surprised if the Guardian shows up here pretty soon."

"We will look forward to it." Steven assured him.

"It was nice meeting both of you. I'll probably be seeing you again before long." Agent Roberts said before turning to leave

* * * * *

Agent Roberts had to fight a little to contain himself to one train of thought.

All the different situations going on around him were attempting to draw his attention simultaneously.

As he drove back to Waxell, he also took the time to quiet himself and find his inner peace.

By the time he arrived in Waxell he had cleared his mind to the point that he was finally able to disregard the extraneous details of the different situations and focus on what was most important.

After swinging by the office and checking in with Hyatt to verify that no one had been needing the services of the FBI so far that day, Agent Roberts moved on to what he was sure was his objective.

Even though it might be argued that the town hall was officially designated as such, he headed toward the actual central hub of Waxell... The Waxell Diner."

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts? How's the camping trip going? How are the kids?" Harry asked pleasantly from behind the lunch counter.

"They're fine. Can you think of anything that I could take back to the camp for them for lunch? You know, kind of like a special treat?"

"Sure. How does a picnic lunch sound? We could load up a few baskets for you and you could just bring them back when you're finished." Harry suggested helpfully.

"Hey! That sounds like a great idea."

"Would you like for me to get you something to eat before I start helping Dad with your order?"

Agent Roberts looked at the shelf behind Harry, then smiled as he said, "How about a slice of apple pie and a cup of coffee?"

"Coming right up." Harry said pleasantly.

"Harry, do you ever feel like you're just in the right place at the right time?" Agent Roberts asked in a distant, philosophical tone as Harry cut the pie.

"Yeah. That's how I feel most of the time." Harry said honestly as he placed the plate of pie and an empty coffee cup in front of Agent Roberts.

"How's that?"

"This is where I belong. I'm exactly where I need to be, doing what I need to do. There's nowhere else that I'd rather be." Harry said as he poured a cup of coffee.

"Thanks, Harry. That's exactly what I needed to know."

"Happy to help." Harry said uncertainly before hurrying back to the kitchen.

Agent Roberts slowly looked around the diner as he silently asked himself, 'So who besides me doesn't fit in here?'

Just then, the sound of the door opening drew Agent Roberts' attention.

"Agent Roberts! I haven't seen you in a while. How have you been doing?"

"I've been keeping busy. What have you been up to?"

"I've been working with Mr. Tomlin at the drugstore, sort of as an apprentice. Even though I've completed my training and am a licensed pharmacist, I'm still trying to learn how things are done 'the old way' by an honest-to-God apothecary."

"So are you on a lunch break?"

"No. It's still a bit early for lunch. This is my day off and I was out running a few errands. I thought that since I was in the neighborhood, I'd stop by to see if my mom was here yet."

"I just got here a few minutes ago, but I haven't seen her." Agent Roberts said, then thought to ask, "Do you have a lot of big plans for your day off?"

"Not really. Harlow's at work and I haven't planned anything."

"Harlow?"

"Yeah, my brother. Did you have something in mind?"

"Yes. But it's going to take at least a few hours. Would you have the time for something like that?"

"What are we going to be doing?"

"You know I'm with the FBI, right?"

"Yes. I knew that."

"I'm working on a case right now..."

"In Waxell?"

"Yeah. I know. Right?" Agent Roberts said with a grin, then continued, "But the thing is, I really need to talk to someone who's outside of everything that's going on to get a steady bead on things."

"I don't know anything about the FBI." Otis slowly warned.

"Good. I don't expect you to." Agent Roberts assured him, then explained, "I need someone who's intelligent, honest, and has a realistic perspective regarding Waxell versus the rest of the world."

"Okay. I get that."

"We can't talk here. Some of what I'd like to tell you is pretty far out there and I'd rather not have other people overhear."

"Okay. We can go back to my place if you want. Harlow's going to be working all day, so no one should interrupt us."

"Actually, there's someplace else that I'd like to go, but before that I have to wait for the picnic baskets Arn and Harry are putting together for the kids."

"I can help you carry them when they're ready."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that. Do you need to do anything before you go?"

"No. I can catch up with Mom later."

"Want some pie?" Agent Roberts asked as he pointed at his plate with his fork.

"Maybe just a bite."

"Grab a fork." Agent Roberts said as he motioned toward the silverware holders that were easily within reach.

Otis stretched forward and snagged a fork before sitting on the barstool at the breakfast bar beside Agent Roberts.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts and Otis talked and laughed about some of the differences they had noticed between Waxell and the 'outside' world. Before they knew it, Harry came out of the kitchen and announced that the picnic baskets were ready.

After paying for his purchases, Agent Roberts and Otis gathered up the heavily laden baskets and began carrying them toward the FBI office.

"Why didn't you park at the diner?" Otis asked, not complaining, but simply out of curiosity.

"My original plan had been to go to the market and get deli sandwiches made for everyone. I was just going to stop in at the diner to see who was there, in case there was someone who could help me."

"No one can hear us now. So what's going on?"

"I'm sure you've heard the stories about the forest northwest of here..."

"I guess you could say that. My mom is seriously freaked out by that place." Otis interjected.

"Have you ever thought that there might actually be something real behind her superstition?"

"Yeah. But I don't think I have enough to go on to figure out what it is that's spooking people." Otis said frankly, then asked, "Are you and Agent Fastbeck here investigating that urban legend? "

"No. That's not what our case is about, although it does tangentially relate to it." Agent Roberts said, then quickly added, "You can put those down while I unlock the car."

It took Otis a moment to realize that they had arrived behind the FBI office.

He carefully sat down his awkward load while Agent Roberts also unburdened himself, then unlocked the car for them.

* * * * *

Once the picnic baskets were stowed, Agent Roberts and Otis got into the car.

When Agent Roberts didn't immediately start the engine, Otis quietly asked, "What am I about to get into?"

"I guess it depends on how you look at it. It's my hope that you'll see this as being the answer to a lot of questions that you've been carrying around."

"Does it have anything to do with aliens?" Otis asked cautiously.

"No. Not a thing. I promise."

"Alright then. I think that I can handle just about anything else."

"I'm going to remind you that you said that." Agent Roberts said with a grin.

"Is it something dangerous?"

"It has its dangers, but I don't think it's going to be dangerous for you specifically, more in general for all of us who are participating in it."

"But you're going to let me in on the big secret about what's been going on around here?"

"Yes. At least as much of it as I've been able to uncover."

"What will I have to do?"

"Most of what I'm doing right now is based on hunches and instinct. At this point, all I'm going to ask you to do is attend a meeting. If I'm right, your presence is all that's going to be needed to balance things out and make them work out the way they're supposed to."

"Okay. Where are we going right now?"

"The Old Tennyson Place."

"I always thought Warren had just been drawn in by the hype and let his imagination run away with him. Do you mean that that place really is haunted?"

"No. At least, not as far as I know. There are just some strange things going on there that can easily be misinterpreted."

"Oh. Okay. I think I can handle that."

"It might get uncomfortable for you for a few minutes, but once we're past that, it really isn't scary at all."

"Are you waiting for me to say that I'll do it?"

"Yes. I just want to be sure that you have realistic expectations before you commit to doing anything."

"It sounds like I'm about to get some of the answers I've been searching for my whole life. You can count me in."

"You might end up getting more questions than answers, but I think that I can safely promise that no matter how things go, you're in store for some surprises."

"What are we waiting on?"

"I just had to know without a doubt that you were sure." Agent Roberts said as he started the car.

* * * * *

Once they were out on the open road and headed out of town, Otis quietly asked, "Now that I've said that I'll do it, can you tell me more?"

"The Old Tennyson Place appears to be some kind of a dimensional crossroad. I don't know if that somehow makes it so that actual paranormal activity is more prominent. But regardless, the energy surrounding that place fills you with such dread that it's nearly impossible to force yourself to walk through it."

"So the spooky feeling might make you think that something normal was actually something paranormal."

"That's my theory at this point. It's by no means been proven." Agent Roberts confirmed, then continued, "The 'crossroads' is a place where our world intersects with others. You'll just have to see it to really understand... well, to be honest, the more I learn about it, the less I think I really understand it."

"There wouldn't be a crossroad if there weren't people to use it. So far you haven't said anything about the people. Why is that?"

"Mainly because they're not human."

"Remember, you said no aliens."

"No. No aliens. So far there have been bigfoots, faeries, Angels, Demons and witches, but absolutely no aliens... at least, that I'm aware of."

"Wait... what?"

"The crossroads connects our world, a bigfoot sanctuary, the habitat where the children of angels live and a colony of witches."

"So these are like... other worlds? Alternate dimensions?"

"Not exactly, no. Although it seems that those things do exist, the people I'm talking about live in hidden places within our world."

Otis looked at Agent Roberts incredulously, waiting either for explanatory evidence or perhaps a punchline.

"They need our help, Otis. They will be discovered and destroyed if we don't help them upgrade their hiding places so that they can remain hidden from modern technology."

"What can we do?"

"Well, to be honest, my role in all of this seems to have mostly played out. The main thing I'm expected to do at this point is to regulate who goes through the door to the crossroads."

"What am I going to be expected to do?"

"I honestly don't know. What it comes down to is that there are four doors and three people releasing powers into the world. To me it seems like we're going to need a fourth person, even if it's only as a placeholder."

"Releasing power? That sounds like it's going to be dangerous."

"To me it looks like it will be dangerous, but not for those of us in the vinculum chamber."

"Vinculum chamber? What's that?"

"The actual room where the crossroads manifest. In that room we can do things that will impact all the connected colonies."

"But you say it isn't dangerous..."

"I don't think so. It's like the control room. It's a place where we can push buttons and make adjustments but the consequences of our actions will most likely be felt by others, in distant places."

"Is this going to be dangerous for the people of Waxell? What's going to happen to them?"

"Actually, that's another reason that I wanted to include you in this. Everyone else has their own reasons and own stakes on the line, even me. I have too many loyalties to too many people to be able to honestly call myself unbiased in every situation. You can look at all of what's going on and speak on behalf of the people of Waxell, or maybe just speak up for humans in general, depending on the topic at hand."

"But that's all you're expecting me to do?" Otis asked cautiously.

"Listen. I don't know what's going to happen. I can't even be sure that having you there is really necessary. But looking at the big picture and the overall symmetry of things, it seems to me that having you there should bring balance to the entire process and make it that much more likely that things will work out for the best for everyone."

As Agent Roberts turned onto a desolate road, Otis quietly said, "I've heard the stories about The Old Tennyson place all my life. I have never once had a desire to find out if what they said about it was true or not."

"If what they told you was about the creepy feeling, I can tell you for sure that it's true. I've already explained that. It's most likely the

subconscious perception of all the energies converging on the area."

"They used to tell ghost stories too, but looking back on those stories as an adult... it's more likely than not that they just made them up so that they wouldn't lose face for running away."

"Despite what it feels like, nothing bad is going to happen to you. But I suppose that I should tell you that as soon as we're inside the vinculum, I have no real clue about what's going to happen next or what's going to be expected of us."

"So you know that we're supposed to be there, but that's it?"

"Saying that I 'know' might be overstating it a bit. But yes, that's essentially true."

"Okay. That makes me feel a little better."

"That I don't know what I'm doing?"

"That you don't have some elaborate plan laid out that I'm going to be expected to complete flawlessly."

"I just expect you to do what you believe is right. Follow your own moral compass and don't worry about what anyone else thinks, not even me. Everyone is going to be acting according to their own motivations."

* * * * *

The ride was certainly not a relaxing one, but looking at it in retrospect, it was absolutely carefree compared to the oppressive feeling of foreboding that assaulted them as they drove onto the property.

"I can't breathe." Otis gasped as he suddenly began to hyperventilate.

"Listen to me. Slow your breathing and try to stay calm."

Otis didn't respond except to lean forward and try to breathe more slowly.

"If we can make it to the back of the house, it'll ease up quite a bit."

Otis nodded that he had heard as he fought against his welling panic.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts skidded his car to a stop alongside Agent Fastbeck's car.

No sooner was the car stopped than he was out and around the car to help Otis out.

"Come on. It's not too far from here. Just power through it and the feeling will let up. I promise."

"I don't know if I can."

"I know that you can." Agent Roberts said firmly, then added more gently, "I've been told that I'm responsible for the people with no voice. The people of Waxell are part of that. What I'm asking is for you to help me by taking on this part of the workload. Do this for the people who you grew up with and care about. Be their voice."

"I... I..." Otis fought to say as he staggered along with Agent Roberts around the side of the building.

"This is it. Just stand right here for a minute and you'll feel better."

It was obviously a struggle for him to do it, but Otis was finally able to get his breathing to return to something resembling normal.

"I thought I was going to suffocate." Otis finally said as he enjoyed a quiet moment of simply standing and breathing in the air.

"That was the worst of it. From here on out it's not as bad."

"Good. I almost didn't make it."

"Is everything alright? Do you need anything?" Kirwin asked as he scrambled up to them in his awkward, coltish way.

"I think we're going to be alright." Agent Roberts assured him, then turned to Otis and asked, "Otis, do you already know Kirwin?"

"I've seen him with his father a few times, but not for a while. He's grown up a lot." Otis said thoughtfully, then asked, "Is he mixed up in this somehow?"

"Kirwin and his grandfather, Steven, watch over the gate to the crossroads."

"Grandpa is teaching me the stuff that I need to know." Kirwin explained to Otis, then turned to Agent Roberts and excitedly asked, "Can we stay and watch you go inside? Grandpa said I had to ask you if it was okay."

"Sure. I don't see any problem with that." Agent Roberts said easily.

"What do we need to do next?" Otis asked cautiously.

"We need to walk into the gazebo over there." Agent Roberts said as he motioned toward it.

"I can't believe how such an innocuous thing can look so absolutely unwelcoming." Otis muttered.

"Yeah. I know." Agent Roberts chuckled, then continued, "But once we get inside, you won't have to worry about it anymore. That eerie feeling will completely go away."

"Sounds nice. What are we waiting for?"

"We're waiting for you to be ready."

Otis drew in a long slow breath to brace himself, then finally said, "Okay. Fine. Let's do it."

Agent Roberts smiled at the response, then turned to Kirwin and said, "I don't know how long this is going to take."

"It doesn't matter. We'll be waiting here." Kirwin said firmly, then explained, "Our family watches the gate to make sure that you can get to it when you need to. But grandpa says that when you're here, we're supposed to stand by in case you need us. If you need anything, just come back out here and let us know and we'll take care of it for you."

Agent Roberts glanced toward the back of the house where Steven was propping himself up with his walker and watching their interaction.

"You're doing a great job teaching him, Steven. On behalf of all of us, thank you." Agent Roberts called toward him.

The old man gave a sincere nod in response.

"Otis, hang back a little and let me go ahead. It'll take me a second to open the doorway, but once I've opened it, you can follow me in."

"Right. And then I'll know once and for all if all of this is real or not."

"Take it from someone who knows, no matter how much you see, you'll never be completely sure."

"I guess not."

With that being said, Agent Roberts set off across the expansive backyard toward the faded and weather worn gazebo.

Although the anxiety was welling within him, knowing what to expect made the unreasonable fear somewhat manageable.

When he was almost close enough to reach out and touch the barrier, he stopped and carefully said, "I call upon the powers-that-be to grant me entry to the sanctuary, I use the power granted by devils. I am the harbinger."

Agent Roberts stepped forward through the archway, then wilted with relief as the energy that had been fraying his nerves suddenly abated.

Chapter 40

"Shawn? Are you alright?" Conrad asked with concern.

"Yeah. Give me a second." Agent Roberts said breathlessly, then looked back through the archway at Otis struggling to approach.

"Just step through and you won't have to worry about the feeling anymore." Agent Roberts called out to him.

A moment later, Otis lunged through the doorway, whereupon he was caught by Agent Roberts and Agent Fastbeck.

"Thanks." Otis whispered gratefully as he tried to regain his composure.

"The good news is, that was the worst of it. The next time you have to enter the vinculum, it will be easier because you'll know what to expect and you'll know without a doubt that if you keep going, that the feeling will eventually end." Agent Roberts said encouragingly.

"Glad to hear it." Otis said with a weary chuckle.

"What's going on, Shawn? Why did you bring Otis here with you?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"Because I think he's going to be needed." Agent Roberts responded simply, then said to the group, "For those of you who haven't met him yet, this is Otis. He's a friend of mine from back in Waxell."

Several uncertain and bewildered looks flashed around the group.

"Otis, I think you already know Agent Fastbeck. Next to him is Paul, who will be one of those performing the spell later today."

"Spell?" Otis asked timidly.

"Yeah. Even though I could tell you a long story about that, it's pretty much just like it sounds." Agent Roberts confirmed.

"Nice to meet you." Paul said uncertainly to Otis, then looked to Agent Roberts, obviously seeking some sort of an explanation.

"Next we have Archdruid Highley. He's going to serve the same function that Agent Fastbeck and I do in the impending proceedings. In fact, it may end up that Otis will be performing basically the same function. We'll just have to wait and see how things work out."

"You can call me Jarvis." Archdruid Highley said quietly as he offered his hand to shake.

"Nice to meet you." Otis quietly responded as he briefly shook the offered hand.

"I don't know if Milo has a title, but he's going to be performing the spell, like Paul."

"No. No title. My name is Miklos Szabla, but everyone just calls me Milo. I'm one of the Druidic Ovates of Nevermore." Milo timidly explained.

"And you're going to be performing a spell? Does that mean that religious people actually have some kind of legitimate magic?" Otis asked cautiously.

"Milo was born with his magical ability. Him being a druid is mostly unrelated to that... from what little I know of it." Agent Roberts thought to add, then looked at Archdruid Highley with question.

"Yes. While there *is* such a thing as religious magic, that isn't what we'll be working with here today." Archdruid Highley confirmed.

Milo nodded his agreement to their assessment.

"Next we have 'Reaper', who is also known as the Child of the Sword. He'll be the third and final magic practitioner, at least in regard to the spell that we'll be involved in."

"What is he?" Otis asked in a whisper as he stared wide-eyed at what seemed to him to be a tall, pale, incredibly thin man, dressed in a black suit that appeared to be a few decades out-of-fashion.

"Would you like for me to explain?" Agent Roberts asked Reaper simply.

"Yes. Please, Friend-Shawn. I would not know what to say; what is relevant."

"Reaper's a Nephilim. His dad is an angel... one of the big ones, from the sound of it."

Reaper demonstrated agreement much as Milo had done earlier, with a simple nod.

"Okay. But what I still don't get is why you brought *me* here." Otis said honestly.

"I think Paul can probably explain that better than I can." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Me? What can I explain?" Paul asked dubiously.

"Well, if I understood what Reaper was saying earlier, what you bring to the table in all of this is the magical 'mechanics'. The reason I invited Otis to join us is because I think he's going to be essential for what we're about to do... from a mechanical perspective."

"How?" Paul asked cautiously, but seemed to be genuinely interested.

"Not being a witch, I don't know much about the basics of magic theory. But from the little bit that I've been able to cobble together from my observations, there are normally four basic elements, right?"

"I guess at the most primary level, yeah. I mean, before you can do much you have to at least be able to manipulate the quasi-

elements, but you can't even tackle them without an understanding of the basic four." Paul confirmed.

"Okay. And in the spell that you're going to be doing, you have three elements. Right?"

"Yes. But that makes sense. There are only three colonies. Air, water and earth."

"Are you sure?"

"Do you *seriously* want for us to play guessing games right now?" Paul asked darkly.

"I suppose not." Agent Roberts chuckled at his sour reaction.

"Friend-Shawn, please continue with what you were saying. I have interest." Reaper said slowly.

"Waxell... or the world of humans in general, it's the fourth colony; the fourth element. It needs to be represented."

"I have been given no knowledge of the need to include a fourth element." Reaper reminded him.

"That makes sense if they don't want for any single person to have all the pieces required to tap into the magical reserves." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"But this person... Otis, isn't a being of power, is he? I don't see what you think you can accomplish by including him in this." Milo said slowly, obviously not trying to offend, but simply voicing the thoughts uppermost in his mind.

"Okay. I'm going off on a tangent here, but I can't think of a better way to explain my reasoning... mainly because it's more of a feeling than anything else."

"Go ahead. Your instincts seem to have been pretty good so far." Paul said frankly.

"The first element, earth, is the foundation that everything else is built on. Speaking geometrically, it's a point, a speck of something which exists in a sea of nothing."

Incredulous looks went around the room, but they were all interested enough to continue to listen.

"The second element, the water, is a point that's taken on a new dimension, becoming elongated, as a line or a plane."

Agent Roberts glanced around the room at everyone paying him their full attention, then continued, "The third element, the air, rises up from the plane and quite literally forms the third dimension. The three combined give us height, width and depth."

There were slight uncertain nods from some around the room, that were more likely prompts to continue than an indication of any understanding of the point he was trying to make.

"If you do the spell now, that's what you'll be working with, the three dimensions of the spell, changing what 'was' into something new."

"I don't see the problem with that." Paul said honestly.

"The fourth dimension, the fire, is change. It's the passage of time and allowance of the future. Unless I'm totally mistaken, even though the spell done with three elements would probably work, it would be something stagnant, prone to atrophy and entropy. It wouldn't have the capacity to live and grow and adapt."

"I wouldn't know how to do something like that... something that *grows*..." Paul began to say, then trailed off in thought.

"You do it already. That's the *magic*."

"I guess... maybe..." Paul responded noncommittally.

"Reaper? What do you think?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Before I answer, please tell, how did you come to this understanding?" Reaper asked cautiously.

"I'm a trained investigator. I do my best to keep my eyes open and continually try to fit different pieces together in different ways. Following what I've observed about magic so far, this is how the puzzle pieces fit together for me." Agent Roberts carefully explained.

"Say for me the words, so that there is no misunderstanding. The cambion did not feed you these ideas, did he?"

"His name is Paul." Agent Roberts said firmly, then continued, "And no, he didn't tell me any of this. His only involvement was that I saw him perform his magic a few times. While watching him, I got an abstract understanding of what's required for a spell to work."

"Apologies, Paul. No disrespect. Only concern for succeeding in our common project." Reaper said haltingly.

"No problem, Reaper. But remember this in case I accidentally insult you sometime later." Paul said with a smile.

"Agreed. In such an event, forgiveness is forsworn." Reaper promised.

"That'll work." Paul said easily, letting it be known with his casual demeanor that he wasn't offended.

"So, what needs to be done next? I have the feeling that we don't have unlimited time." Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Before we get into that, you should know that we may have a little problem with the Wudewas." Agent Fastbeck said grimly.

"What would that be?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Ud-wra has said that the belief has been that the Wudewas, as a people, have become incurious and complacent. Such people have no need for magic, and so it has been lost. The only thing he could suggest was that there are ancient magical texts that survive which could be used to train the one who will rise up."

"Rhuru-wra?"

"Yes. At least he thinks so." Agent Fastbeck confirmed, then cautiously asked, "How'd you figure that out so quickly?"

"He's the one who had the courage to go outside their barrier and get help. He's the only one who's really had a taste of the outside world. With the courage and the knowledge that there's more in the world than what he's familiar with, I can see how that could drive him to want to take a chance and try something new." Agent Roberts explained.

"Yes. I suppose that *would* make him the only real candidate. Hopefully he'll pass the test and prove that the Wudewas magic isn't really lost."

"Isn't that going to take more time than we have?"

"It would if he were going to go through the entire training, but Ud-wra thinks that if Rhuru-wra can pass the initiate trial, that it should be enough. It will prove that the Wudewas people are still capable of channeling magic."

"How long is that going to take?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I guess that depends on how long we stand here talking about it." Agent Fastbeck answered frankly.

"Does that mean that he's doing it right now?"

"He's waiting for us. I get the feeling that Rhuru-wra has become disenchanted with his peers and is desperate to be included in a group of like-minded and similarly motivated people. I think it will mean the world to him if all of you would attend the ceremony and show him your support."

"How long is that going to take?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"The ceremony is going to be held in a clearing about a three minute walk from here. From what Ud-wra said, the ceremony itself shouldn't take but a few minutes. Either Rhuru-wra will be able to wield the magic or he won't." Agent Fastbeck explained.

"Open the archway and anyone who wants to can follow." Agent Roberts said decisively.

Agent Fastbeck turned to face the archway that opened to a dim scene of thick foliage and mist before saying, "*In the name of Cernunnos I seek entry to the sanctuary entrusted to my care. I use the power granted by gods. I am the guardian.*"

As soon as the words were spoken, he stepped forward and passed through the archway.

Agent Roberts turned to Otis and said, "You're welcome to join us if you like, but if it's getting to be too much for you, you can stay here and wait for us. This shouldn't take too long."

"I don't know what it is that's about to happen, but I have a feeling that it's something that I don't want to miss." Otis said honestly.

Agent Roberts smiled at the response, then said, "Well then, come on."

* * * * *

After stepping through the archway, Agent Roberts looked around to find that all those who had been in the vinculum chamber had chosen to follow.

The light was dim and although it wasn't particularly warm, the level of humidity was astonishing.

"Agent Fastbeck is the only one who can communicate with the Wudewas. Just listen to him and he'll explain anything that's important to us." Agent Roberts quietly explained to Otis.

"What's a Wudewas?" Otis asked in a whisper.

"You'll see in a minute. Just, whatever you do, don't freak out. Please try to trust in the fact that Agent Fastbeck and I wouldn't intentionally put you in danger. I have a feeling that we're about to witness a once-in-a-lifetime spectacle and it'll be great if you're in the right frame of mind to appreciate it."

"I'll do my best." Otis said nervously as he struggled to remain at Agent Roberts' side.

* * * * *

As Agent Fastbeck had said, the trek through the misty, heavily forested area took the group about three minutes.

They finally came to a natural clearing, about twenty feet around and stopped as each member of the group caught sight of who was already there, waiting on them.

Much to Agent Roberts' surprise, only Ud-wra, Rur-wra and Rhuru-wra were present. He had actually been expecting at least a few other members of their colony to attend the ceremony to show their support.

Agent Roberts looked to his right to find Otis frozen in place, staring wide-eyed with his mouth hanging slightly open. Although it wasn't exactly the reaction he had hoped for, he supposed that it wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been.

As he looked past Otis, he saw Archdruid Highley's frozen expression of horror. Considering Archdruid Highley's contact with the Nephilim, Agent Roberts expected him to be the member of their group most at ease with the Wudewas.

Milo and Paul, on the other hand, appeared to be equal parts excited, amazed and enthralled. It made Agent Roberts smile to see the delight dancing in their eyes.

When he looked at Reaper, Reaper met his gaze with calm serenity.

Agent Roberts mirrored his expression before turning his attention toward Ud-wra and his sons.

Ud-wra growled something quietly which Agent Roberts took to be instructions for his younger son.

Rhuru-wra took two steps to the edge of the clearing and retrieved a large, crudely made basket, woven out of reeds.

Everyone watched silently as Rhuru-wra extracted a stone tablet, intricately carved with tiny symbols.

Rhuru-wra reverently placed the tablet on the mossy ground before him, then stood to his full height of nearly ten feet.

He was an impressive sight, somehow both frightening and strangely beautiful at the same time.

Agent Roberts was surprised when Rhuru-wra began to slowly perform gestures as he growled and chittered in his strange native language.

"What he's saying is some kind of spell. Although I can make out the meanings of the words, there's no direct translation that would make any sense to you. It sounds to me like more of a stream of consciousness than any of the spells that I've heard before." Agent Fastbeck said quietly, doing his best not to distract from Rhuru-wra's performance.

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The growling, chittering chant went on for a few minutes before Rhuru-wra became still and silent.

Everyone watched and waited for something to happen... but nothing did.

The quiet was finally interrupted by Ud-wra growling something quickly at his son.

Rhuru-wra immediately retrieved the stone tablet from the mossy ground in front of him and replaced it with another.

Agent Roberts got the sense that the words and gestures were somehow different from the first attempt, but he couldn't point to any specific thing that had changed.

Regardless, everyone watched silently, and waited for something to happen.

Although Agent Roberts was hoping for the best, he was increasingly preparing himself for the worst.

Everyone continued to watch and waited as the late adolescent Wudewas worked with single-minded determination to accomplish his magical goal.

A movement drew Agent Roberts' attention and he was relieved to see a small misty vortex forming in the center of their circular clearing.

The tiny whirling dervish took on a more tangible form as it began to stir up some of the damp leaves scattered around the clearing.

Agent Roberts tore his attention away from the little whirlwind long enough to glance at Rhuru-wra.

What he saw in that flash of an instant was a level of concentration that could rival that of any of the students of magic that Agent Roberts had recently come to know.

In that moment, Agent Roberts had no doubt whatsoever that Rhuru-wra had been able to reconnect to his lost magical heritage.

Ud-wra growled abruptly and Rhuru-wra immediately responded with another series of growls and gestures.

The little whirlwind dissipated into nothingness right before everyone's amazed eyes.

"That was very well done, Rhuru-wra. We're all very proud of you." Agent Fastbeck said firmly.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but voice his agreement, as did the others around the circle.

Ud-wra growled something which caused silence to fall over the rest of those gathered.

"Rhuru-wra has just proven to us that the Wudewas have retained their connection to natural magic, which has always been supposed as being their birthright. That being the case, Ud-wra wants us to

know that, when the time comes, the Wudewas people will be honored to stand in unison to support us as we remake the barriers." Agent Fastbeck announced to the group.

"So him doing that one spell proved that all the Wudewas were capable of learning magic?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Rhuru-wra has proven that the Wudewas haven't strayed so far from their magical heritage that they've lost the ability to reconnect with it. That being the case, we should be able to use the entire Wudewas community as a retention pond for magic for Milo to command in the coming spell." Agent Fastbeck said seriously.

"As I understand it, Milo will only be responsible for releasing the magic stored in the Southseid barrier. Someone else, probably one of the teachers, will be the one using the released magic and recasting the Southseid barrier spell." Agent Roberts said informatively.

Rhuru-wra grunted inquisitively, drawing everyone's attention.

"This is Milo. He's probably going to be the one releasing the magic to you and your people." Agent Fastbeck responded as he indicated Milo amongst their group.

Rhuru-wra turned his attention toward Milo and very slowly grunted and growled in his direction.

"Rhuru-wra wants you to know that he considers you to be his teammate and coworker. He wishes to share his vow to you that he will do his best to see that no harm comes to you in your upcoming cooperative work." Agent Fastbeck carefully translated.

"Please tell him that I will make the same vow to him. We'll watch out for each other so that we can both succeed." Milo quietly responded.

"Milo wants you to know that he will make the same vow to you. Be it success or defeat, you will achieve it together." Agent Fastbeck relayed.

Rhuru-wra grunted a quick phrase, then looked to Agent Fastbeck to translate.

"He suggests that we proceed to the next phase of our plan. He says that he has done what he set out to do here. He will meet with us at the vinculum chamber later."

"What are we doing next?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I think you should return to the vinculum chamber, then each of us should go and find the people who will be doing the spellcasting and let them in on all the new developments." Agent Fastbeck said simply, then continued, "Paul and I can leave from here and round up Professor Everstone, Filipe and Mr. Bentley Brown and bring them back. Archdruid Highley can go get the group at... what do you call it? The Protectorate?"

"Just call it Nevermore. That includes the protectorate and everything that surrounds it." Agent Roberts explained.

"Right. Archdruid Highley can go and get the team that's there and bring them back to the vinculum chamber. While he's doing that, Agent Roberts can go get the team at Brynnhollow. It turns out that the vinculum chamber there is located within Brynnhaven. Andrea will be standing by to help you there."

"I've never met Andrea." Agent Roberts reminded him.

"I know. But when I had a chance to think about it, I realized that things could end up going this way, so I talked to her about what was going on. She volunteered to keep a lookout for you. As soon as you emerge from the vinculum chamber, just follow the walkway and she should be waiting for you nearby."

"Okay." Agent Roberts said uncertainly.

"What should the rest of us do?" Paul asked curiously.

"Well, you'll be going with me. As far as everyone else, I think it'll be best if everyone goes to the group that they'll be working with

so that we'll have the most opportunity to compare notes and make plans." Agent Fastbeck said seriously.

"You're aware that I've mostly been teamed with Mr. Hansen, Dex and Zanner, aren't you?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yes. I'm aware of that. But as far as I know, there are only three of us who can open the doorways. Do you think it would be better if Archdruid Highley went to Brynnhollow?" Agent Fastbeck asked simply, obviously not believing it to be so.

"No. You're right, of course. You've just had the most contact with the Brynns. It seems like you should be the one working with them."

"That would have been nice, but it didn't end up working out that way." Agent Fastbeck said simply, then continued, "It's time for us to stop talking about it and start doing it. Does anyone have anything else to add before we go?"

"What am I going to be doing while all of you are out doing this?" Otis asked cautiously.

"You can go with me if you want. I think it'll be good for you to meet some of the different people that we're going to be working with." Agent Roberts said pleasantly.

"Excuse interruption." Reaper said abruptly, then when he had all attention focused on him, he continued, "There is much preparation for Assembly of the Magi. Would it be possible for Paul and Milo to remain with me in the meeting chamber so that we can discuss, plan and prepare?"

"Yeah. I know that Milo's going to need to work on his spell for sure and there will probably be a lot more things that the three of you will have to work on together." Agent Roberts offered in support of Reaper's suggestion.

"Yes. It sounds like that may end up being a more productive way to proceed." Agent Fastbeck cautiously agreed.

"Then I guess we've got a plan." Agent Roberts said, then turned to Ud-wra and bowed with respect before turning to withdraw down the path that they had arrived on.

Otis mimicked Agent Roberts' action, then followed him.

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As Agent Roberts retraced their path through the misty forest, he realized that the others were following along behind him and Otis. When he finally stepped into the clearing, he got his first good look at the outer manifestation of the archway to the vinculum chamber.

Earlier, they had been so intent on meeting with the Wudewas that he hadn't thought to look back. Since the archway didn't seem to be shimmering with magic, Agent Roberts supposed that it was still open from when they had passed through earlier.

"It's Stonehenge." Otis said in amazement.

"Yeah. Something like that." Agent Roberts absently said as he stared at the mossy ancient stone archways, positioned to form a circle with roughly the same dimensions as the gazebo.

After a quick dismissing shake of his head, Agent Roberts continued on and entered the vinculum chamber with the others following immediately behind him.

"What are we going to be doing now?" Otis asked cautiously, then shyly admitted, "I didn't understand most of what you were talking about back there."

"Try not to worry about it. Everyone has their own things to do, but you and I have a mission all our own."

"What's that?"

"You know that big scary place that your mom talks about? It's called Brynnhollow. That's where we're going." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"The place where people go and never return from? That place?" Otis asked reluctantly.

"Yeah. That's the one. But I've been there and I've gotten to know a few of the people who live there. I can promise you that it's nothing to be afraid of." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Maybe not for you, but I'm just a normal human being." Otis said anxiously.

"So am I..." Agent Roberts began to say when he was interrupted.

"Would you guys mind moving back so that I can make us a table and some benches?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Come over here." Agent Roberts said quietly as he guided Otis to stand by the wall.

Without much more than a lifting gesture, Paul 'summoned' a table and benches to erupt from the floor with a great sucking ::whoosh::.

Otis was obviously startled and stared at the table and benches in wonder.

"Come on. We'd better get going. These guys need to get to work on their stuff and I can try to explain some of this to you along the way." Agent Roberts said quietly as he gently guided Otis to walk across the room to another archway.

"But... how did he do that?" Otis asked in amazement as he continued to stare at Paul.

"It's magic. That's really about all I can tell you." Agent Roberts said simply, then as they stopped to stand before the archway, he extended his open palm upward and carefully said, "*I call upon the powers-that-be to grant me entry to the sanctuary, I use the power granted by devils. I* ***am*** *the harbinger.*"

"Hey! Who are you calling a devil?" Paul called across the room at him.

"The guy who sprouts horns when he's angry, that's who." Agent Roberts playfully called over his shoulder, then guided Otis to walk through the archway into an exquisite ornate garden.

* * * * *

"When you were talking about the crossroads you said there were different realms. Which one is this?" Otis asked as they stepped out of a beautifully carved stone structure. It looked something like a mausoleum to Agent Roberts untrained eye, but he thought it best not to share that particular observation.

"Like I told you, all of these places actually exist on earth, within our realm. But where we are now is a sanctuary that houses a group of witches."

"Witches? Like Halloween with brooms and pointy hats and all that?" Otis asked cautiously.

"Not quite. They look like regular humans but have magical powers. I'm not clear on everything about them, but from what I understand, the people of this colony have been cursed and as a result, they aren't able to live with regular people in human society." Agent Roberts explained as they walked through a breathtakingly elegant formal garden.

"But you said that we don't need to be afraid of them. Right?"

"Well, they have magic powers and they don't know us. That being the case, I wouldn't go out of my way to piss them off. But since Agent Fastbeck said that we're expected, I don't think that we're in immediate danger."

"Are you Agent Roberts?" A pleasant looking woman asked as she stood from a stone bench that they were approaching.

"Yes. That's right. You must be Andrea."

"Yes. It's a pleasure to meet you. Conrad's had nothing but good things to say about you since your arrival. You've really impressed him."

"I'm lucky to get to work with an experienced agent who's not only willing to share his valuable insights, but who also encourages me to take risks and try things on my own." Agent Roberts said sincerely, then thought to add, "Andrea, this is Otis. He's one of the residents of Waxell."

"Do you mean like one of the regular townspeople?" Andrea asked cautiously.

"Yes. That's not a problem is it?"

"Well, only in the sense that his people would do everything in their power to hunt down and kill every last person in Brynnhollow if they knew that we were here. I don't know anything about Otis personally, but I'm scared as hell of what he represents. He could destroy everything and everyone in the world that I love." Andrea carefully explained.

"I have a feeling that including him in what we're doing today might go a long way toward preventing what you're ultimately afraid of." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Conrad trusts you and has mentioned your good instincts about things. So based on that, I'll do what I can to help you." Andrea said seriously.

"Well, the only thing I was going to ask you was to help us find Miss Oaken and her students. I'm supposed to take them to the vinculum chamber." Agent Roberts explained.

"My sons have been visiting with them, so I have a pretty good idea of where they are. Come with me and I'll take you somewhere that you can wait while I go get them."

"Why don't we just go with you? Otis hasn't had a chance to look around yet and I wouldn't mind taking the grand tour." Agent Roberts suggested.

"Can you fly?" Andrea asked simply.

"Not without a plane." Agent Roberts reluctantly admitted.

"Then you'd just slow me down. Come on. I'll introduce you to someone, then I'll go get them for you." Andrea said pleasantly.

After a glance at Otis to verify that he didn't have a problem with the arrangement, Agent Roberts agreed and began to follow.

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"Queen Marimba, I've brought you the guests that you've been asking about. May I present Agent Roberts from the FBI and his companion Otis, a resident of Waxell." Andrea said formally as they entered what could only be described as a castle via a patio entrance from the garden.

"Welcome gentlemen. I am Queen Marimba, both the sovereign leader and the elected leader of Brynnhaven. I realize that dear Andrea has other matters that require her attention at the moment, but perhaps the two of you would enjoy a leisurely walk in the garden with me while we await her return." Queen Marimba pleasantly suggested.

Agent Roberts was immediately put off by the ceramic mask and faded finery that the elderly woman wore.

"Yes. Neither of us has had a chance to see much of your beautiful... town? Kingdom? I'm sorry, I don't know exactly what to think of this place." Agent Roberts finally admitted.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll be going now." Andrea quietly interrupted.

"Yes. Do hurry back, Dear. Otherwise I might be tempted to feed these men and I wouldn't want to spoil the picnic that they so diligently planned and had prepared for them." Queen Marimba said warmly.

Andrea bowed slightly before backing through the patio door that they had entered through.

"Come this way. We need to stop in and check on the babies before we're on our way."

Agent Roberts and Otis shared an uncertain look before following Queen Marimba out of the room, deeper into the castle.

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"It seems that we've arrived back ahead of Andrea. Would you mind terribly if I left the two of you on your own for a few minutes while I check on a few things?" Queen Marimba asked pleasantly.

"Please go!" Agent Roberts said immediately, then backtracked and said more slowly, "I mean, please take all the time you need. I think that Otis and I could do with a few minutes of peace and quiet after all the excitement of the day so far."

"Very well then. I shall return shortly." Queen Marimba said, then turned with a dramatic flair befitting the monarch that she claimed to be.

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Once both men were certain that they were alone, Otis quietly confided, "That woman is stark raving mad."

"I've seen things that were beyond imagining since I arrived in Waxell, but nothing has disturbed me quite as deeply as the sight of those 'babies' of hers." Agent Roberts said anxiously, obviously troubled by the encounter.

"I can't believe that you actually picked one of them up." Otis quietly admitted.

"I didn't want to offend Queen Marimba by refusing. But I just don't understand how a simple little baby doll could be so horrifying." Agent Roberts said as he looked away.

"At least Giuseppe doesn't have visible teeth. I was afraid that if I looked away for an instant, Toaster Oven was going to go right for my throat." Otis reluctantly admitted, hoping to make Agent Roberts feel a little bit better about the encounter.

"As disturbing as those dolls might have been, the only time I felt that we might be in danger is when we were taking the tour and

walking along the edge of the chasm. Even though she's older than both of us put together and couldn't weigh much more than a hundred pounds, I was half convinced that Queen Marimba was going to go psycho on us at any moment and toss both of us into that bottomless ravine." Agent Roberts quietly explained.

"Actually, right at that moment I was remembering Andrea asking you if you could fly." Otis said frankly.

"Oh yeah. I hadn't even thought about that." Agent Roberts quietly admitted.

"To me it looked like a plan was coming together." Otis said as he met Agent Roberts' gaze.

"When I promised that you wouldn't be hurt here, I had no idea about any of this." Agent Roberts explained.

"I know. It's okay. And if nothing else, this at least helps to explain why they can't be around normal people." Otis said and finished with a somewhat forced smile.

"I'm not sure if this has anything to do with that, but I agree that Queen Marimba probably wouldn't do well in the outside world." Agent Roberts conceded.

"So, what do we need to do next?" Otis finally asked, more than ready to move the conversation in another direction.

"There's not much we *can* do until the team gets here." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Wait... Was that there before?" Otis asked suddenly.

Agent Roberts followed Otis' worried gaze to where Toaster Oven was propped up on the couch... looking back at them with a menacing snaggletoothed grin.

"No. I'm sure it wasn't." Agent Roberts said quietly.

"Andrea and your friends should be arriving any moment now. We can go and meet them in the garden if you would like. It's a bit

stuffy in here." Queen Marimba said as she glided into the room with the train of her gown slightly billowing in her wake.

"Um, yeah... yes. That sounds good." Agent Roberts said as he fought to focus his attention on her.

"If we're going out, we should take the babies with us. I'm sure that they could do with some fresh air." Queen Marimba announced decisively.

Agent Roberts did his best to maintain a neutral expression. Then in a tightly controlled voice he began to say, "Of course, we would be happy..."

His words trailed off when he noticed that the ratty little doll, Toaster Oven, was nowhere to be seen.

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After a quick stop by the nursery to collect the baby dolls, Agent Roberts, Otis and Queen Marimba walked out the patio door.

Although Agent Roberts was disgusted by the filthy little doll that he had been given to carry, he was relieved that he had ended up with Leonid instead of Toaster Oven.

"If we had more time I would take you into Brynnhaven proper so that you could explore, but you have other things that you need to be doing at the moment." Queen Marimba said as they walked along at a casual pace.

"Maybe we can come back and visit when we aren't so pressed for time." Agent Roberts said obligatorially, not intending for it *ever* to be so.

"Yes. Of course." Queen Marimba said delightedly, then added, "Be sure to bring Michelle with you when she comes to visit. I'm *so* looking forward to meeting her."

"How do you know about Michelle?" Agent Roberts immediately asked.

"And how did you know about the picnic lunches?" Otis interjected.

"Pssh. That would be telling." Queen Marimba said as she waved it away dismissively.

"Excuse me, but I'm not going to let this go. Tell me what you know about my sister and how you know it." Agent Roberts demanded.

"I know what I know. Who's to say how or why it happens." Queen Marimba said simply, then continued more quietly, "You might want to watch your temper Agent Roberts. It could cause bad things to happen."

"Are you threatening me?" Agent Roberts asked as he glanced around the open garden area for any sign of a threat.

"Me? Goodness no." Queen Marimba chuckled at the very suggestion, then said more darkly, "But I'm hardly the most dangerous person here right now."

As she said the words, she conspicuously began to rock and soothe Toaster Oven in her arms.

Agent Roberts couldn't be sure if it were his imagination or not, but regardless, he reacted to the sensation of the swaddled doll that he was holding, shifting in his arms.

As he reflexively looked down, he saw the baby doll's cold lifeless glass eyes peering up at him.

Agent Roberts couldn't be sure if his heart skipped a beat or not as he fought between his instinct to soothe the pseudo-child in his arms or throw the hideous thing to the ground with all his might, then stomp on it.

In the end, his better angels prevailed. Although he didn't croon or talk in baby talk to it, he *did* rock the child-sized effigy in his arms as though it were something precious.

"There they are now." Queen Marimba said delightedly.

Agent Roberts felt a wave of relief wash over him at the sight of Miss Oaken, Corabeth and G approaching with Andrea, Cain and Deimos.

"Hi guys! I didn't expect for you to be out here waiting for us." Andrea said cheerfully.

"Queen Marimba somehow *knew* that you were about to arrive." Agent Roberts said with a dubious look askance at her.

"Spooky, huh?" Andrea said, barely restraining a chuckle, then continued by asking, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes!" Agent Roberts answered immediately.

Rather than answer verbally, Otis walked up to Andrea and unceremoniously handed his baby doll, Giuseppe, to her.

"Where are we going?" Miss Oaken asked curiously.

Agent Roberts followed Otis' example and handed Leonid to Deimos as he responded, "We've located the Vinculum chamber. Right now we're gathering all the magic practitioners there so that we can plan what to do next."

"So everyone's coming here, to Brynnhollow?" Corabeth asked uncertainly.

"Not exactly. I'll explain it to you along the way. We need to be going." Agent Roberts said quickly.

"Who's this?" G asked cautiously as he looked at the stranger amongst them.

"Otis. He's from Waxell. Let's go." Agent Roberts said urgently.

"Yes. It's best If you go now and attend to your important business." Queen Marimba said warmly, then turned her ceramic face toward Agent Roberts and continued, "But don't forget to bring Michelle out here to meet us. Her eventual happiness may depend on it."

Certain that anything he might say would make matters worse, Agent Roberts turned and started walking away. Whether the others followed or not was up to them, but he had determined that he had exceeded the limit of his patience.

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts?" Otis asked as he hurried to catch up to him.

"You can call me Shawn if you like."

"Are you alright?"

"When she involved my sister she crossed the line. If I had stayed one more minute, I might have said or done something that I'd regret."

They walked through ornamental gardens for a few minutes before Corabeth cautiously asked, "Were you going to tell us about where we're going?"

Agent Roberts looked back and saw the others silently following him and trusting in whatever he decided to tell them.

The revelation was enough to snap him out of his dark combative mood and set him back on task.

He slowed his pace as he said, "The vinculum chamber connects the barriers to each other. At the same time, it also allows the barriers to share resources. The ceremony to release those shared resources is going to be conducted at the vinculum chamber. It stands to reason that the spells to remake all three barriers will probably have to be done in close proximity to the vinculum chamber to coordinate the timing."

"Have you talked to Professor Everstone about this?" Miss Oaken asked cautiously.

"That's what we're going to do now. While Otis and I have been going to get you, Agent Fastbeck has been getting Professor Everstone's team to bring them to the meeting."

"What about Mr. Hansen?"

"Archdruid Highley went to get him."

"I didn't realize that the druids were that deeply involved." Miss Oaken said frankly as the pace of their walk returned to something nearing normal.

"If we're going to have any hope of pulling this off, it's going to take everyone and everything that we have. Even then, we might still come up short."

"Can you feel that?" G slowly asked.

"It feels like we're in danger, although I can't tell where it's coming from." Miss Oaken said as she looked around cautiously.

"That's just the vinculum chamber. The feeling will pass once we're inside of it." Agent Roberts assured them.

"Are you sure?" G asked with difficulty, "I mean, are you *really* sure?"

When Agent Roberts looked at G he was surprised to find him in rather disturbing clown makeup. The painted-on expression that he wore accurately conveyed his discomfort with the situation.

Understanding what was happening, he couldn't resist the urge to see how the others were affected.

Corabeth's brown hair had begun to turn wispy gray or white and seemed to have lengthened. Her face also seemed to be elongated and slightly distorted. She appeared to be in a transitional state, although he couldn't determine what she might be transitioning into.

Miss Oaken's transition was less obvious at first. But at second glance, Agent Roberts could see the exposed hinges and joints, which appeared to be much like those of a puppet or marionette. Despite his recent encounter with Leonid, Agent Roberts didn't feel

the least bit uncomfortable with her appearing to be somewhat less than fully 'real'.

"Otis, would you mind helping them while I go ahead to open the vinculum chamber?"

"Yeah. I'll take care of it." Otis assured him.

Agent Roberts took him at his word and began to sprint ahead.

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts reached the majestic stone structure with its ornate columns and elegant engravings, he walked to the archway with the magical blur and spoke his invocation.

The doorway immediately opened to him and he stepped inside. Although he had begun to build up a certain tolerance to the false anxiety, he still wasn't completely immune to it.

"If you can make yourself go through the doorway, it'll stop making you feel as creeped out." Otis called to the people following him.

Agent Roberts smiled at the fact that Otis was able to rise to the occasion. Trusting that Otis would be able to get everyone safely inside, he turned his attention to the vinculum chamber and its occupants.

Paul, Reaper and Milo were sitting at the table, just as he would have expected.

Professor Everstone and Filipe were both standing behind Milo and seemed to be unhappy about something. Mr. Bentley Brown was standing *near* them, though not necessarily *with* them, and didn't appear to be any more or less happy than was usual for him.

Agent Fastbeck was standing by the Southseid doorway appearing to be detached and professional. Agent Roberts immediately took that as being a sign that he should likewise remain detached from whatever drama was unfolding before them.

"Any problems?" Filipe finally cautiously asked into the silence that had fallen over the room.

"None worth mentioning." Agent Roberts responded in his most neutral tone of voice.

Just then, Otis, Miss Oaken, Corabeth and G barreled into the room, obviously somewhat distressed by their recent experience.

"Paul, would you mind making a few more benches? It looks as though our new arrivals could do with a few minutes to collect themselves." Professor Everstone asked quietly.

"Yeah. Sure." Paul said easily, then turned his head to look around the periphery of the room. As he did, benches began to erupt from the floor along the walls between the doorways.

Before anyone could react, Agent Roberts automatically said, "You'll need to be over here, behind Paul."

"Friend-Shawn is aware. It is as I was telling you." Reaper said calmly.

"But it doesn't make any sense. They use air magic and I use water." Paul retorted in frustration.

"What did I miss?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously, feeling that, however unintentionally, he might have well and truly 'stepped in it' with his innocuous comment.

"Reaper was just about to explain how the pairings and partnerships might not be quite what we were expecting." Agent Fastbeck explained.

"Like this." Paul said as he motioned toward Miss Oaken, G and Corabeth seated on the bench behind him, "It makes absolutely no sense at all."

"If you're standing in a burning building, do you want for someone to give you a lit torch to fight it with?" Agent Roberts asked simply.

"Seriously, I'm not into guessing games. Can't you just tell me?"

"I thought it was obvious. Here in the vinculum, your elemental affinity doesn't matter as much as your nature. The Magi were assembled to stand with and for the people of the colonies. You're a demon, so naturally you will stand with the cursed."

"But I channel water, so I need to stand with the Wudewas."

Agent Roberts let out a huff of exasperation, then slowly said, "Yes. You channel water, but that doesn't have anything at all to do with who you stand with. Do you remember the spell you did with G to create that little ice house out by Brynnhollow?"

"Yeah."

"You need to do something like that again, except instead of making an ice house, this time the three of you will need to work together to pull up the magic stored in the other dimensional spaces of the vinculum."

Paul turned to look at Reaper before asking, "Is that what you were trying to tell me?"

"The sentiment Friend-Shawn expressed is the point that I would have eventually made." Reaper said slowly.

"Within each barrier you use that kind of magic, but outside the barriers you use *all* the magic that's available to achieve your goals. I mean, what's the point of releasing it if you're not going to use it?" Agent Roberts carefully explained.

"Just when I think that I'm seeing the big picture, I find out that there's still more layers." Paul said quietly.

"So, in this new paradigm, we will use the three available magics in concert, not isolated from each other." Professor Everstone asked slowly.

"I thought that was the whole point of tapping into all the different barriers' magic at once, so that you wouldn't each be limited like you were when you were inside the barriers." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"And in making that assumption, you came to the conclusion that the fire element would need to be acknowledged and represented, since we would be working outside the confines of the barriers." Professor Everstone said speculatively.

"Yeah. Sorry. Like I said, I thought it was obvious." Agent Roberts said as he looked around the room.

"Maybe we're just dumb." Filipe suggested into the silence that followed.

"I think it is more likely that Agent Roberts has a unique perspective compared to the rest of us." Professor Everstone said diplomatically.

"Hold on. I think I'm getting it." Paul said slowly.

Everyone waited to see what revelation Paul had come to.

"Here in the vinculum chamber we are both inside and outside all the barriers at the same time. In this space, we can call up the stored magic and release it. The spellcasters will then use that released magic to recast the barriers." Paul said slowly.

"And don't forget that the demon needs to represent the cursed while the angel represents the blessed and nature guy needs to watch out for the other nature guys." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Nature guy?" G asked with a grin.

"I might not be up-to-date on my terminology, but I think I'm making my point."

"The arcane knowledge confirms what Friend-Shawn has said. The summons is one spell, performed in unison by the assembled Magi." Reaper said slowly.

"Milo? You got anything?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Since Reaper and Paul have been helping me to craft my spell, they probably know it better than I do. That's going to make

adapting my spell to work in concert with theirs a whole lot easier." Milo said thoughtfully.

"Agent Roberts, what do you see Otis doing in all of this?" Paul asked thoughtfully.

"You're the one who knows about spell mechanics. I'm just an outside observer." Agent Roberts said frankly, then continued, "But when you make a spell diagram, don't you have to make it balance, even if you don't actively use every facet?"

"Yes. Especially from an alchemical perspective, the balance of forces is necessary... the balance of humors." Paul finished in a thoughtful tone.

"Right. So I don't have any idea of what Otis is actually going to be doing, but I'm pretty sure that he's needed here." Agent Roberts finished with a smile of accomplishment.

"Just a little bit farther and it'll stop feeling so bad!" Archdruid Highley called behind him as he stepped through the Nevermore archway.

Everyone turned at the sight of Mr. Hansen, Zanner and Dex scrambling toward them.

"That really SUCKED!" Zanner proclaimed as he stepped through the doorway.

"I don't think you'll get any argument from us." Agent Roberts said with a fond smile at the boy.

After looking around to see who was present, Mr. Hansen cautiously asked, "What are we doing?"

All attention turned to Professor Everstone.

After a moment to consider, the professor finally said, "It appears that we have everyone and everything that we're going to need to cast the spells. I believe that our next step should be the crafting of said spells so that we can move on to the actual casting."

"That sounds like it could take a lot of time and I think that everyone could do with a good meal before we start in on marathon spellcasting." Agent Roberts suggested.

"Although that is a lovely sentiment, I'm afraid that we don't have time to go back to our cars, drive to find food and return. A delay like that would make it evening before we could even start the actual spellcasting " Professor Everstone reluctantly informed them.

"I brought picnic lunches from the Waxell Diner, enough for everyone." Agent Roberts finished with a smile of accomplishment.

"Oh... thank you." Professor Everstone said with surprise.

"If you'd like, we can all go through the Waxell doorway and have our lunch right now. When we're done, we can all start doing what we need to do for the barrier spells." Agent Roberts suggested.

"Is there some way we can invite Rhuru-wra to the picnic with us? It'd feel wrong to me if we did this without him." Milo asked anxiously.

"We can go right now and invite him if you want." Agent Fastbeck offered.

"You wouldn't mind?" Milo asked cautiously.

"I won't as long as you don't make me miss out on the picnic. Let's go."

"Yeah." Milo said quickly as he scrambled to join Agent Fastbeck.

"Save us some food." Agent Fastbeck said firmly.

"No promises." Agent Roberts responded with a grin.

* * * * *

As soon as Agent Fastbeck had uttered his invocation he ushered Milo out the Southseid doorway. Agent Roberts did much the same with the rest of the group, leading the seemingly endless

procession of wildly different people out through the archway that led to the Old Tennyson Place.

Agent Roberts glanced toward the shade at the back of the house and called out, "Kirwin! Would you have a minute to help me with something?"

"Yeah! What can I do to help?" Kirwin asked hopefully as he scrambled toward the parade of strangers walking out of the gazebo.

"Would you mind taking my keys and showing the guys where the cars are parked? They can help you carry the picnic baskets back here."

"Picnic baskets?" Kirwin asked to confirm.

"You haven't eaten yet, have you?"

"No. I hadn't even thought about it." Kirwin said honestly.

"Good. Then go grab the picnic baskets and we'll eat as soon as you get back." Agent Roberts said happily, then noticed that Kirwin was staring and seemed to have gone a little pale.

Agent Roberts glanced where he was staring, then said, "We'll introduce you to Reaper and the others while we eat."

"Um... yeah." Kirwin said distractedly.

"Guys, who wants to go with Kirwin to get the food?" Agent Roberts called out more loudly.

Agent Roberts nearly broke into laughter when every teenage head popped up in unison and turned in his direction simultaneously at the utterance of the word 'food'.

"Follow Kirwin." Agent Roberts said fondly, then thought to add, "If you're not back here within five minutes I will use the full resources of the FBI to hunt you down! We're hungry too."

The smirk that Paul flashed in his direction did nothing to assure him.

* * * * *

"Professor Everstone, before we get started, there's someone I'd like for you to meet." Agent Roberts said as he drew the professor away from the group.

"Who might that be?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously as he walked with Agent Roberts through the tall grass.

Agent Roberts gestured ahead of them toward the old man with a walker standing in the shade of the house.

In a voice loud enough to be heard by both men he said, "Professor Everstone, may I present Steven Tennyson. He and his family have been keeping watch on this entrance to the vinculum chamber. The young man I was just talking to is Kirwin, his grandson."

"It's an honor to meet you, Professor. I've been waiting my whole life for this day. I'm glad that I lived long enough to see it." Steven said sincerely.

"I don't know who arranged all of this, but I'm glad that someone thought ahead." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"So you don't know either? That surprises me. I thought that those that we were to help would know what all of this has been about." Steven said honestly.

After a sympathetic nod, Professor Everstone quietly said, "We only know as much as we absolutely need to know..."

"...sometimes less." Agent Roberts interrupted.

Professor Everstone glanced at Agent Roberts for a moment, then gave a slight nod.

"Steven, will you and Kirwin share in our picnic with us?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"Are you sure having us join you isn't going to interfere with your plans?"

"Even though you're not going to be included in everything we do, the truth is that none of us will be. We each have our own part to play and all of us will contribute to the overall project." Agent Roberts said soberly.

"Am I allowed to know just what this project is? I mean, I know that our family made a pact with beings greater than ourselves and that it has been a great honor... but I've often wondered just *what* the purpose behind it all is." Steven said earnestly.

"The short version is, we're working to protect those who can't protect themselves. Should we succeed, our reward will be knowing that these communities of people will continue to exist." Agent Roberts said honestly.

Steven looked across the overgrown lawn to where the others had gathered and finally asked, "The tall thin one, is he one of them who will be saved?"

"Yes. Since there's no equivalent to his name in our spoken language, we call him Reaper. But he's only one example, there are others who are more removed from what you would define as 'human'."

"You said that because of what we're doing they will continue to exist. Just how literally do you mean that?" Steven asked cautiously.

"If we fail, at the very least, the colonies that we're protecting could be destroyed. At worst... I suppose that it could mean the complete extinction of three groups of people that *we* could have preserved."

"And you say that Kirwin and I will be able to help you to protect these people in some small way?" Steven asked hopefully.

"By protecting the Waxell gate you're making it possible for us to perform the ritual to protect all the colonies without being

discovered by the mundane human world." Agent Roberts explained.

"By the way you say that, it sounds almost like you don't include me and Kirwin in with the other mundane humans." Steven said speculatively, almost hopefully.

"People like you, me and Kirwin are human, but we're far from mundane. We've been included in something that is almost beyond belief. We're getting to see and experience things usually reserved for only the most brilliant and insightful..." Agent Roberts trailed off, then thoughtfully added, "...and insane."

Steven chuckled and nodded in understanding.

"Come, the food will be here shortly. Please join us." Professor Everstone said warmly.

"Yes. Thank you. I would be honored." Steven said sincerely.

Although Steven's pace was incredibly slow due to the combination of him using a walker and the tall grass, Agent Roberts and Professor Everstone didn't betray the slightest impatience, either in word or deed, as they walked along with him to join the gathering.

* * * * *

After assurances that they would help him stand when it was time to do so, Agent Roberts and Professor Everstone were able to help Steven get into a comfortable sitting position on the ground.

The children had taken it upon themselves to divvy up the food and were doing their best to make the picnic meal a pleasant experience for all of them.

"You didn't start without us, did you?" A familiar voice called out from behind them.

Agent Roberts didn't even have to look to know who was there.

"We're just getting everything set out. No one has started yet." Agent Roberts said assuringly.

At Steven's wide-eyed stare of horror, Agent Roberts turned to confirm what he already suspected.

"Steven, I'd like for you to meet Rhuru-wra, known among his people as 'the Wanderer'. He's the young wizard who will be acting as a bridge between the magic users and his people in the coming spell." Agent Roberts explained.

"Are you..." Steven began to ask, then trailed off when Agent Fastbeck began talking quietly to Rhuru-wra.

"He can't understand us so Agent Fastbeck has to translate." Agent Roberts explained.

"What is he?" Steven finally asked.

"We call their people Wudewas, but I think that around here they're most commonly known as 'bigfoot'." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"Kirwin and I are going to be helping to preserve a colony of bigfoot?" Steven asked in wonder.

"Yes. That's okay with you, isn't it?" Agent Roberts asked, although he was fairly certain of the answer.

"Grandpa! Isn't this great?" Kirwin asked as he ::plunked:: himself down at his grandfather's side.

"I would have said 'beyond belief', but I think 'great' is a more appropriate description." Steven said warmly as he gathered his grandson into a one-armed hug.

"Here you go." G said as he placed metal camping plates, loaded with food in front of Steven and Kirwin.

"Thanks!" Kirwin said sincerely.

"Corabeth will have some drinks for you in just a minute." G said before hurrying away.

Before anyone could respond, Rhuru-wra growled something inquisitively.

Agent Fastbeck immediately translated, "Rhuru-wra is interested to know about you and your people. I didn't know what to tell him. What would you like for him to know about you?"

Steven and Kirwin were both surprised by the question and looked to Agent Roberts for guidance.

"A bigfoot is asking you what it's like to be you. I think that this might be one of those 'once in a lifetime' opportunities that you're always hearing about." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Kirwin and I are here to be part of something bigger than ourselves. I guess, looking around, that that's what we're all here for." Steven said introspectively.

Agent Fastbeck quietly relayed what Steven had said.

Rhuru-wra seemed to ponder that for a moment, then slowly growled something in response.

Rather than relay what he had said, Agent Fastbeck gave his own response.

There was another long silence, then another growl.

"Rhuru-wra is still mourning the loss of some friends and members of his family. He said that Kirwin reminds him of his younger brother, Hru-wra, and seeing him here, participating in this, makes it hurt just a little bit less."

Kirwin didn't even hesitate.

He immediately got up from his grandfather's side and walked directly to Rhuru-wra. After a long moment of looking him in the eyes, Kirwin moved forward and gave Rhuru-wra a firm hug, although due to their vast difference in size it was almost like Kirwin was trying to hug a wall.

After a moment, Rhuru-wra slowly raised his arms and ever so gently returned the young teenager's embrace.

Rhuru-wra growled something deep in his throat which was nearly a purr. Before Agent Fastbeck could say anything, Agent Roberts quietly said, "No translation needed."

Chapter 42

As the conversation moved on to other topics, Agent Roberts glanced around and noticed that Milo was watching them.

"Thanks for thinking to include Rhuru-wra. It was the right thing to do." Agent Roberts said as he picked up his plate and drink then moved them over so that he could sit next to Milo.

"I think I know how he feels, wanting to be a part of something. It's kind of what keeps me with Jarvis. Well, that and the fact that I've never really known anything else." Milo said quietly.

"Regardless of why things worked out the way that they did, you ended up being in the right place and time to make a unique contribution. Think about it, out of all the people here, no one else can do what you can do. Whatever you may have wished, it looks like you got more than you bargained for."

"I don't know for sure if this has anything to do with my heart's desire."

"From here on out, you're going to need to focus on what *is*. The how's and why's don't matter at this stage of things."

Milo looked at Agent Roberts for a long moment before speculatively asking, "You have some idea of what I'm capable of, don't you?"

"Not really. But I know that it frightens you... that's why you hold yourself back so much."

"When the time comes, I'll be able to handle it. I've got enough skill and more than enough power. You don't need to worry about me doing my part."

"I wasn't worried. I just came over here to thank you for thinking of Rhuru-wra. He's young and he's from a completely different culture. With everything else going on, I can't devote as much time as I

would like to seeing that he's being included. With a group this big, it's possible that someone in need might go unnoticed."

"You're not alone in this. Everyone here will not only help if you ask them to, but will also take the initiative to help if they notice that there's a need. Face it, you *can't* do it all by yourself. You're going to *have to* trust us, at least to some degree." Milo said frankly.

Agent Roberts followed his gaze and saw Rhuru-wra participating as an equal with the people around him.

"I can't step away and trust that everything will turn out for the best. I'm just not wired that way." Agent Roberts stated simply, then continued more gently, "I won't stop watching, but I think I might be able to take a step back."

"It looks to me like we have all the pieces in place for something amazing and wonderful to happen. Do what you have to do to keep them safe, but after that, leave it be."

"Is this secret wisdom from your faerie heritage?"

"Not as far as I know. The only wisdom I have to offer is an old saying that I've been told. 'To enable the miracle, stay out of its way'." Milo said quietly.

"That settles it. You're *not* allowed to spend time with Reaper. He's making you all cryptic and weird." Agent Roberts said with a grin.

"As if I wasn't like this before." Milo chuckled.

Agent Roberts smiled at the response, then quietly said, "I listened, okay? I'll try."

Milo smiled and nodded his acknowledgement.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of circulating among the various groups, Agent Roberts came to the conclusion that while everyone was nervous about the upcoming spell, they were also optimistic. All the picnic

baskets had been unloaded and they were all eating and talking in their small groups.

Determining that the time was right, Agent Roberts stood and said, "Everyone! May I have your attention for a moment?"

The chattering voices quieted and everyone waited for what Agent Roberts was going to say.

"Before we get started in on anything, I think it's important that everyone understand which teams they're going to be on. The situation has grown to such a degree that some of our original assumptions are no longer valid." Agent Roberts said as he looked around the group, then thought to add, "As some of you will recall, the original group thought that we would be working on the Southseid barrier."

A few nods of agreement and whispers spread through the assembled crowd.

"I know that a few of you are going to have questions about the reasoning for some of the assignments, but please wait until we're done to ask about that, otherwise this could drag on for hours."

Everyone seemed to agree to the arrangement, so Agent Roberts continued, "Professor Everstone is leading the project and is the one in charge of everything. If you notice anything wrong, get with him. While I might be sympathetic to your situation, the fact of the matter is that he's the one who can make changes."

After a moment for that message to be received, Agent Roberts turned to indicate Reaper and said, "Reaper is aware of the requirements of the power summoning part of the project, so if you have any questions having to do with that, Reaper is the one you need to talk to.

"I'm going to step back now and let Professor Everstone announce the team assignments." Agent Roberts said, then took a literal step back and sat down beside Milo, where his unfinished food was still waiting for him.

Professor Everstone slowly made his way to standing, then glanced around the gathering before saying, "Please keep in mind that things are still subject to change. It is my hope that things will even out so that all the essential roles will be filled, but as things stand... let's just see what we've got here and if we can make this work.

Agent Roberts wasn't the only one to look around with concern.

"To begin with, the team at the Southseid barrier will include G, to wield the Mikael Spear and Milo to use that summoned power to release the storehouse of air magic."

Agent Roberts looked around to find that everyone was paying their full attention to the professor.

"Once that magic is released, we're going to direct it to one being who can serve as a bridge to his people."

Agent Roberts slowly nodded, then glanced at Rhuru-wra.

"There is no shortage of candidates in that regard, so following this meeting we will look at those potentials and choose the most favorable."

Agent Roberts wanted to stand and ask why Rhuru-wra wasn't automatically chosen, but didn't want to violate the rules that he had set forth only minutes before.

"At the Brynnhollow barrier, Mr. Bentley Brown will be using the Third Grail to empower Paul to release the stored water magic."

"How am I even going to do that in an air zone?" Paul asked plaintively.

"The final grouping..." Professor Everstone said very deliberately, in an effort to keep them on track. "...Zanner and Dex will empower Reaper to release the earth magic to Mr. Hansen, who can direct the magical flow through a bridge to the entire Wudewas people."

"There will need to be an expert spellcaster, or at the very least, several novice spellcasters to assist me. There is no way that I will

be able to direct the magical flow of that magnitude all by myself. It's not possible." Mr. Hansen said firmly.

"Yes. I am well aware of the need." Professor Everstone said firmly. The tone of his voice, more than his words, said that he was also concerned about the lack of qualified personnel.

As much as he didn't want to, Agent Roberts felt compelled to ask, "Are we going to be able to complete our mission with the people we have?"

"There are one or two things that I will need to check on before I can answer that question with any degree of certainty." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"What do the rest of us need to be doing while you're doing that?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Crafting spells." Professor Everstone said simply, then continued, "However, if you wouldn't mind doing so, perhaps while the others are doing that we could drive into Waxell to see what, if anything, Mr. Darroch has been able to arrange to help us."

"I didn't know that he was arranging anything." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"I can't be sure that he is. I told him about our situation and he said that he would investigate what alternatives are open to us." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"I have my satellite phone with me, if you'd like to save yourself the trip." Agent Roberts cautiously suggested.

"Have you tried using it this close to the vinculum?"

"No. I hadn't even thought about it." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"If you would like to do so now, it might save us some time." Professor Everstone said simply.

Agent Roberts already had the sat phone out of his pocket and was dialing.

After a moment, Professor Everstone quietly asked, "Is it too close to the vinculum, do you think?"

"I don't think that's it. I tried calling Mr. Darroch's personal number and it couldn't connect and shunted me immediately to voicemail. It's acting like he's out of range." Agent Roberts said as he dialed another number.

"I hadn't considered that we might not be able to get in touch with him."

"Hyatt? This is Agent Roberts. Has anyone..."

"Three? Did they tell you their names?"

"No. That's fine. I'll be there in a few minutes. If they come back, just tell them to wait there."

"Thanks Hyatt. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Bye."

"May I assume that Mr. Darroch is in Waxell?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"That's right. Him and two other people." Agent Roberts confirmed as he started walking toward the parking lot.

"Should we tell the others what we're doing?"

"We're going to Waxell. We'll be back in a minute." Agent Roberts called toward the picnickers without slowing his pace.

No one seemed concerned as they watched Agent Roberts and Professor Everstone disappear around the side of the house.

* * * * *

Once they were out on the open road, heading toward Waxell, Agent Roberts calmly said, "I could have gone to get Mr. Darroch on my own."

"I know. But I realized that I would like to take the opportunity to talk with you for a few minutes." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"I'm guessing that you want to know how I can understand the meta-spell better than some of your students."

"Actually, I thought your explanation to Paul was perfectly reasonable. Considering that the charm that you wear lets you see through magic, and add to that your advanced training in problem solving, it makes perfect sense that you can form your own independent view of the world."

"Oh... thanks. Why did you want to talk to me then?"

"Basically to compare notes. I see things being a certain way and have a wealth of experience to draw upon, but you've demonstrated that you have a unique point of view. I believe that if we compare the conclusions that we've reached, that we will do the most good for our teams."

"Dag can't do the protectorate spell alone." Agent Roberts said bluntly.

"I know."

"So what are we going to do about it? Because I can't get past that one point."

"What we're going to do is trust that Mr. Darroch understood what I was trying to tell him on your 'party line'. Assuming that he did, then we can hope that at least one of those people that he's bringing is well versed in both barrier creation and the earth element."

"I have no idea how common those skills are. Is that unusually rare?"

"I suppose you could liken it to trying to find someone who knows how to blow glass and play the accordion. Both skills are somewhat rare, but finding one person with both... that's asking quite a bit."

"If we can't find someone like that, will we be able to make it work another way? You know, find one person who's an accordion player *and* another who's a glass blower?"

"While it *is* possible, it adds another point of failure... that being a failure of the synchronization."

"But we'll do what we have to do?"

"We will attempt to make the most out of what we have been given to work with."

"The other one I'm worried about is Paul. I'm afraid that the pressure may be weighing too heavily on him."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that." Professor Everstone said assuringly, then explained, "I see a lot of myself in that boy. At his age I thought I knew everything, and whenever I uncovered something new, I was almost frantic to learn as much about it as I could."

"I'm guessing that that's what got you into teaching."

"It was a factor. I know that my own journey might have been made a bit easier if I had someone who understood what I was feeling and allowed me a little extra latitude when I was focusing on a problem."

"From what I've seen, you've been giving all the students the space that they need to thrive while gently guiding them in the most productive direction. From my vantage point, it looks almost like you're walking a tightrope."

"A very apt metaphor. But I should also mention how helpful you and the teachers have been. You've been providing them direction and an example to follow until they can adapt to an unfamiliar situation."

"I really haven't done much of anything..." Agent Roberts began to feebly protest.

"Filipe and Dex think the world of you. You've become a surrogate father to both of them in the absence of their own. Likewise, I can see that both Paul and Zanner have adopted you as an uncle or older brother figure in their lives. You've not only contributed immeasurably to this project, but you've also made a profound and possibly lifelong impression on all of their lives."

After a moment to consider the professor's words, Agent Roberts quietly said, "I joined the military and later, the FBI, so that I could do my part to help make the world a better place. But I can honestly say that it never once occurred to me that I would be making that happen by helping to guide and inspire the next generation."

"I can't think of a better or more enduring way of doing it." Professor Everstone said frankly.

After turning off the side road onto the main, Agent Roberts quietly said, "Thank you for giving guidance and allowing extra latitude in regard to me as well. I appreciate the opportunity that you've given me."

"You've taken advantage of it, that's all the thanks I need."

* * * * *

Conversation faltered after that, but it was only a matter of minutes before they were driving into town.

"There they are." Agent Roberts said as he slowed his car.

"Where?" Professor Everstone asked as he quickly looked around.

"Not them, but their rental car. They're parked at the Waxell Diner." Agent Roberts said as he swung his car around to park across the street from the diner.

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts stepped into the restaurant, he immediately spotted Mr. Darroch and two other people at a table near the serving counter.

"Mr. Darroch. It's good to see you again." Agent Roberts said as he and Professor Everstone approached.

"It's good to see you too, Shawn. How are you doing, Professor Everstone?"

"More than anything else, I'm relieved to see you here."

"It is my honor and pleasure to present Jerrell Couleigh and Dr. Jevaun Williams. They're here to offer us a hand."

"Dr. Williams and I are somewhat acquainted, what with both of us working at the school." Professor Everstone said diplomatically.

"Yes. Although we haven't had occasion to work together on a project before." Dr. Williams confirmed.

Before they could become lost in chit-chat, Professor Everstone hurriedly said, "Please excuse my impatience, but I am anxious to know what talents you will be able to contribute to our effort."

"Jerrell is adept at elemental earth magic, Dr. Williams is adept at elemental water and I, myself, am adept with elemental air. From our cryptic conversation last night I couldn't tell where you were falling short in your endeavors, but hopefully the three of us will be able to fill in the most serious gaps for you." Mr. Darroch said professionally.

Before Professor Everstone could respond, Agent Roberts said, "Not everything we're doing depends on elemental affinities. While they're important up to a certain point, there's another paradigm at work where it matters if you're blessed, cursed or a natural being."

"That's rather... unusual." Dr. Williams said cautiously.

"That's what we thought too." Agent Roberts confirmed.

"Agent Roberts, I didn't hear you come in. Can I get you anything?" Harry asked as he approached the table with three plates of food.

"I was able to enjoy some of the picnic lunch that you made for us, so I don't need a meal, but if you have some apple pie left, I could do with a slice and a cup of coffee."

"Is Sanka okay?" Harry asked as he started placing meals on the table.

Agent Roberts hesitated, but finally said, "You know what? I think I'm ready to take the plunge. I'll give the Sanka a try."

"What about you? Can I get you anything?" Harry asked Professor Everstone, then shyly admitted, "I'm sorry. I remember you being here before, but I don't remember your name."

"There's no reason that you should." Professor Everstone said bluntly, then added, "I believe that Agent Roberts has the right idea. I'll have some apple pie as well."

"Would you like some Sanka to go with that?"

"No. A glass of milk, if you would."

"I'll be right back with that." Harry said enthusiastically.

"One more thing." Professor Everstone quickly added.

"Yeah?" Harry asked as he froze in mid-step.

"My students call me Professor Everstone. However, you may call me Michael, should you wish to do so."

"Yeah. Okay Michael. It's nice to meet you. I'll be back with your pie in just a minute." Harry said happily before dashing away.

"Despite all the things I've learned about since I've been here, the people of this town still surprise me." Agent Roberts said fondly.

Without asking or being invited, Professor Everstone slid into one of the available seats at the table.

Agent Roberts immediately followed his lead.

"Before the waiter comes back, what can you tell us about the difficulties that you've been having? Mr. Darroch was only able to give us the most general idea of what was going on." Dr. Williams asked with a rather pronounced Caribbean accent.

"What started out as one barrier in need of renovation has turned out to be three. The three colonies were positioned and designed to act like a spell diagram. Each of the colonies has been producing elemental magic to share with all three colonies, but also producing an excess which has been kept in reserve." Professor Everstone said somberly.

"It sounds like quite a lot of planning and effort went into this. Have you determined its purpose?" Dr. Williams asked curiously.

"It would seem that those who arranged all of this intended for us to be able to use the magical reserves to make repairs and recast the barriers, if necessary." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"No." Jerrell muttered thoughtfully.

Everyone around the table looked at him inquisitively, but no one asked what he meant.

"Here you go. Can I get you guys anything else?" Harry asked as he approached with pie and drinks.

"No. I think this should do it for a while." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"I'm going to be in the back helping Dad for a few minutes. Just yell if you need anything." Harry said as he placed the items on the table before them.

"We'll do that. Thanks, Harry." Agent Roberts said appreciatively.

Harry smiled at the thanks, then dashed away.

"What's wrong, Jerrell?" Mr. Darroch asked cautiously.

"Whoever set up the colonies, they wouldn't leave it so that just anyone could come along and tap into a reserve of magic like that." Jerrell said thoughtfully.

"The magic is well protected." Professor Everstone assured him.

"It's going to take an Assembly of the Magi to release it." Agent Roberts added.

"Arranging something like that could take *months*." Mr. Darroch said frankly.

"Actually, that's been the least of our worries. Everything for the Assembly of the Magi seems to have fallen into place." Professor Everstone informed the group.

"Yeah. And Paul is taking on the role of Balthasar in the assembly." Agent Roberts added.

"No. Even though he's capable of putting on a good show with his ability to perform multiple spells simultaneously, he's still very young and new to his magic. From what little I know of it, an Assembly of the Magi is an incredibly high level spell. You'll need to find someone else to do it." Mr. Darroch finished firmly.

Before Professor Everstone could respond, Agent Roberts calmly said, "There is no one else."

"Although the spell is designed to release incredible amounts of magic, Paul's part in the spell is to, in essence, open the valve. He won't be in the path of the magical flow." Professor Everstone hurried to assure him.

"Mr. Darroch..." Agent Roberts began firmly, then continued more gently, "D, I know that you're protective of Paul, but he's literally the only one who can do this. According to everything that I've heard about this, they need a being with an otherworldly connection who can interact with the 'cursed'. That's Paul and no one else."

"Yes. And while I suppose that any of the Nephilim with magical talent could serve as Melchior, the role of Gaspar to link to the magical beings of nature is another unlikely and unique assignment. While I don't use the word lightly, it seems almost... predestined." Professor Everstone reluctantly finished.

"Do you think that the gods are involved?" Jerrell asked cautiously.

"There is evidence that they have been. There is no indication that they are currently aware or involved to any degree." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"Whether they are or not, does it change what we need to do next?" Agent Roberts asked seriously.

"I suppose not." Mr. Darroch conceded, then explained, "But having them involved usually means that things will work out to 'their' benefit, not necessarily ours."

"Do we have any other choice?"

"Do it. Don't do it. Do nothing." Mr. Darroch said simply, then added, "That's about it."

"Doing nothing will not improve the situation." Professor Everstone said simply, even though Agent Roberts was certain that all present were aware of that.

"Okay. So what do we have to do next?" Agent Roberts asked in an effort to get them back on task.

"The holders of the relics, the relics themselves and the Magi will need to enact the assembly and cast the spell to release all the stored magic. When that's done, the spellcasters will direct the released magic to those who will serve as bridges to their respective peoples." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"How likely is it that the released magic will disintegrate the spellcasters or the bridges?" Agent Roberts asked uncomfortably.

"I wouldn't say that it is 'likely', however, I have to admit that it is 'possible'." Professor Everstone admitted.

"Do you have any idea what roles the three of us will be able to play in your scheme?" Mr. Darroch asked cautiously.

"I believe that we have everything adequately covered in regard to the relics and the Magi. Where we seem to be falling short is in the spellcasting, specifically, the recasting of the barriers."

"While the three of us are adept spellcasters, I don't think that any of us are experienced with the casting of barriers." Jerrell said uncertainly.

"If we were, we probably would have been included on the initial team." Mr. Darroch responded frankly.

"Mr. Hansen and Miss Oaken have my complete faith in their abilities to craft the necessary spells. What we need are experienced casters to prevent the fate that Agent Roberts mentioned earlier." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"I consider it part of my job to see that everyone on my team returns home safely." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"Since two of my sons are on your team, I'm glad to hear that." Mr. Darroch said seriously, then thought to ask, "What part will G be playing in the events?"

"G is the designated holder of the Mikael Spear, a magical artifact which channels the essence of elemental air."

"Wait. Are you saying that G has achieved a level of control so that he can command an *artifact*?" Mr. Darroch asked incredulously.

"Yes. But since Paul and Zanner have also been able to make similar achievements, it doesn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary to him." Professor Everstone said seriously.

"But most witches will never even *encounter* an artifact level item, much less be able to command it." Mr. Darroch said with concern.

"This is why they were chosen, because they had this potential." Professor Everstone said simply.

"What else do we need to discuss before we hit the road?" Agent Roberts asked as he once again tried to guide their conversation back toward their group objective.

"I, for one, would like to know as much as possible of what I will be expected to do so that I can prepare." Dr. Williams said honestly.

"Yes. Well, as long as you understand that everything is still subject to change, I can tell you how it appears that things will go."

"Understood."

"Dr. Williams, I believe that when it comes time to recast the barrier, that you will be partnered with me and a young man named Filipe. Once we've directed the released magic into something of a retention pond by way of a bridge, we will work together to recast the Southseid barrier." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"Are you speaking of Filipe Pena?" Dr. Williams asked cautiously.

"Yes. He was chosen not only for his elemental water affinity and thaumaturgical skills but also due to the fact that he can synchronize his magic with Paul's. Although he is young and not overly powerful, he has demonstrated an impressive level of control. I've found him to be level headed in a crisis and decisive under pressure. I think that he will make a valuable contribution to our collective spelling effort."

"I remember him from his arrival at the school. He seemed so adrift. I'm happy to hear that he's doing well. I can't wait to see for myself how he's progressed." Dr. Williams said with a smile.

"You'll get your chance soon." Agent Roberts interjected.

"Do you have anything in mind for me?" Jerrell asked cautiously.

"Did you say that you have an earth affinity?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then you may actually be the answer that we've been looking for."

"How's that?"

"Mr. Hansen is currently the only earth mage we have here. Well, technically Zanner Sands is also an earth mage, but he's going to be tied up accessing the artifact magic for the Assembly of the Magi. There wouldn't be any possible way for Mr. Hansen to deconstruct and recast the entire protectorate barrier spell all by himself. Even with two of you, it's still going to be quite a feat."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to call in a few more earth mages to do this?" Jerrell asked cautiously.

"Everything has fallen into place in the here and now. I have a feeling that if we don't take this chance that we're being given, that there probably won't be another." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Considering that the fingerprints of the gods are all over this thing, he could very well be right." Professor Everstone said gravely.

"Yeah. It sounds like them." Mr. Darroch reluctantly agreed.

"I just thought that I'd ask." Jerrell said weakly.

"Before we go, is there going to be anything that I can do to help?" Mr. Darroch asked cautiously.

"Yes. If you wouldn't mind, you could help us perform the recasting of the Brynnhollow barrier. You'll be working alongside Miss Oaken and Corabeth Knawld." Professor Everstone said professionally.

"What about the boys? Where will they be?" Mr. Darroch asked cautiously.

"G will be magically supporting one of the Magi. I don't know that you'll be working directly with him. However, Paul is going to be the Magi serving Brynnhollow, so there's a good possibility that the two of you will end up working together. We're not exactly sure of how everything is going to manifest in its final form."

"If the boys weren't here, I probably would have sent someone else in my place." Mr. Darroch said frankly.

"Regardless of your reason for being here, we're glad that you are." Agent Roberts assured him.

* * * * *

Once the men were finished with their meals, Mr. Darroch paid their bill.

Agent Roberts and Professor Everstone led the way out of town in Agent Roberts' car.

"So, how do you feel about things now?" Agent Roberts finally asked.

"Like there's at least a *possibility* of success." Professor Everstone said simply.

"To me it feels like we're teetering on the edge of the impossible." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"We are." Professor Everstone said without hesitation.

Agent Roberts glanced at him inquisitively.

"From all appearances, hundreds of years ago, possibly even thousands, a plan was devised. Certain things were put into place and set into motion so that everything would come together in the right time and place. Here and now. So even though we're faced with a series of unlikely coincidences and conveniences, we have no choice but to make the most of what we've been given to work with. To do any less would almost certainly condemn some, if not all, of the colonies that we've been entrusted to care for." Professor Everstone finished gravely.

"But what is the point of all this? If the gods went to all the trouble to set this up, why didn't they just make the barriers impenetrable to begin with? Why did Ud-wra's family have to die? Why do the

kids have to be put in danger and risk being swept away in a tidal wave of magic?"

"Making the barriers impenetrable from the beginning wouldn't produce what the gods are seeking."

"What's that?"

"That would be the big question, wouldn't it? From my own observations, I've come to the conclusion that it has something to do with the growth of cultures and heroics. I don't have any hard evidence to support it, but it seems to me that the gods provide opportunities for us to grow and overcome."

"And for the victory to have any meaning, to us or to them, the stakes have to be high. A victory that doesn't matter isn't really a victory."

"Again, this is something that I concluded based on my own observations."

"No. It's a good theory. I mean, since we're stuck up on stage, performing the play that they wrote, we can only do our best. Although it would be nice if they let us have a peek at the script every now and then."

"If you had ever studied about portents and omens, you'd know that they sometimes do... at least when you're about to face an important decision."

"*And unto the harbinger I shall say, worry not for the matters of which thou hast no influence. Seek balance. Trust in thine own mind.*" Agent Roberts quoted from memory.

"Yes. Just like that." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"*To enable the miracle, stay out of its way*."

"I'm guessing that you've been getting the portents rather strongly." Professor Everstone said hesitantly.

"Only in the sense that they've been clubbing me over the head to take notice of them."

"And have you?"

"Yeah. I have."

"Then I think we're ready."

Book 3.3: Unsung

Chapter 43

"Dad! What are you doing all the way out here?" The young dragon-boy asked as he swooped down to gently deposit the small animal that he had been carrying.

"I've just been visiting your great grandfather. but I think the better question might be, why aren't you two in school and what the hell do you think you're doing flying around transformed in broad daylight?"

"It's okay. This is kind of a special occasion. Mom came and got us out of school so that we could help G and the others from the outside." The young dragon said as the tiger striped animal that he had been carrying began to grow and take on a more humanoid shape.

"What's going on that's got you so excited?"

"There's Mom. She'll want to tell you. Besides, I didn't understand all of it anyway." The young dog... cat... boy said as he stood on two feet.

As the white swan came to a graceful landing beside them, Ares quietly said, "Andrea, I'm surprised to see you here."

"You know how things are. Just as soon as we think that everything's settled, something new comes along to stir things up." Andrea said as her body transitioned to a new form.

"Never a dull moment, huh? Probably not at all how you assumed it would be when you decided to stay here."

"That's certainly true." Andrea chuckled at the understatement as she completely resolved into her Oskmey form of a half human, half swan.

"What's going on?" Ares asked with concern.

"I don't know how much you already know, but basically, the witches from outside are planning on taking down the Brynnhollow barrier and recasting the spell."

"Yes. I was already aware of that much, although I don't know any details."

"Thanks to the time we spent with Sophia, Corabeth and G, I think we know more details about it than we will ever need to know. But what's important right now is that it sounds like they're going to need our help."

"Okay. What can *we* do?"

"From the way I understand it, they're going to need people who can accept a deluge of magical energy from them and disperse it to their clan and kin."

"Wait! Who am I talking to?" Ares asked cautiously.

"What do you mean? What a strange question."

"Am I speaking to Andrea Brynner or Caer Ibormeith?" Ares persisted.

"I'm still me, Ares. Every now and then she just pops in to give us a little help."

"'Clan and kin' doesn't sound like something that Andrea would say." Ares said almost accusingly.

"Well, if Caer is bothering to speak through me, that must mean that it's something important. We should probably pay attention to it."

"What do we need to do?"

"Gather a few people to help disperse and diffuse the magical torrent that will soon be coming your way."

"Why don't you just go into town and ask Carn to get some people to help you? I'm sure it wouldn't take much more than a request from you."

"While it's true that we need warm bodies that can store and release a magical charge, that's not the only thing that we need. When the first bolt of magic hits you, you'll automatically reach out to those who are emotionally closest to you to help you shoulder the burden of channeling so much magic."

"Okay. I suppose I can see that. But why do you need *me*?"

"I can't do it. Despite the curses and the magic that's been used on me, at the core, I'm still a human. I can't hold enough of a magical charge. I have to wear my necklace to hold the tiniest charge at all."

"So, since you can't do it, you want for *me* to do it instead?"

"Well, Conrad can't store a charge either, so you were next on my list after him."

"I think I'm missing something here. I still don't see why you can't just ask Carn."

"Because the first person in the chain has to be someone known to us, who cares and is cared for. As the requirements were revealed to us, it became clear that you were our only real choice. I don't know anyone who would have a better chance of creating a long and involved enough chain to accept and store the accumulated magic of all of Brynnhollow until it's ready for use." Andrea fought to explain.

"Even though there's probably someone better than me to do it, I wouldn't know who that is. And with you coming all the way out here to find me instead of waiting for me at my house, I'm guessing

that we must be dealing with limited time. So why don't I just go ahead and do it, at least until someone better comes along."

"Good. I'm glad you said that because I didn't have a backup plan." Andrea said appreciatively.

"How much time *do* we have?"

"From the way Conrad was talking, they could be ready to start casting it this afternoon."

"It's after noon now."

"Then we'd better gather the people closest to you so that you won't get totally obliterated when the magic hits you."

"Where do we start?"

"That depends on you. Who would you want to stand with you at a time like this?"

"Dark, of course. Then probably my grandfather. And Drake too, I think." Ares said thoughtfully.

"What about Jim and Tannis?" Cain quickly asked.

"Although I love them like my own children, I can't see myself calling out to them for help."

"No, but Drake might. They should probably be there to help him manage his overflow." Andrea said thoughtfully.

"We want to be there to do that for you, too, Dad." Deimos stated firmly.

"No. It's too dangerous."

"Ares, if the boys don't get the magical flow from you, they'll get it from Jim and Tan. It'll be best if they're with us where we can keep an eye on how things are going and explain to them how to manage it."

"If that's how it works, it sounds like this could spread like wildfire."

"Hopefully it will. Otherwise the pooled magic might end up being more than you can endure."

"What should we do first?"

"I think our best bet will be to split up. Let's go and get everyone and meet in Queen Marimba's garden. We'll walk to the vinculum chamber from there." Andrea said decisively, then thought to ask, "Can everyone find their way to the garden?"

"I haven't actually been there, but I've flown over the area a few times. I know where it is." Ares said seriously.

"We were just there with you this morning so we know how to get there. No problem." Deimos said confidently.

"Good." Andrea said with relief, then hurriedly continued by asking, "Cain, will you go and get your great grandfather and take him there?"

"Yeah. But I don't know how long it's going to take us. We might not be able to get there before dark."

"Just do your best. Get going." Andrea said firmly.

No sooner had she said the words than Cain shrank into his fully animal form. As Andrea watched him scamper away, she said to the others, "The rest of us can fly. Ares, go get Dark, Deimos, go get Tannis and Jim at their school. I'm going to get Drake."

"What happens if Conrad comes for us before we're all there?" Ares asked cautiously.

"We'll deal with that when the time comes. Too many things are up in the air and outside our control to be committing to much of anything right now." Andrea said firmly.

"Speaking of 'up in the air', that's where we should probably be." Ares suggested.

"Right." Andrea said before shrinking into the form of a swan.

"I'm going to have to hurry too. Jim and Tan can't fly." Deimos said before transforming back into his full Wyvern form.

Ares stared after him for a moment, then reminded himself that he wasn't dealing with unlimited time.

* * * * *

"Dark? Are you out here?" Ares called uncertainly as he peeked inside the mask and curio shop door.

"Ares? You're transformed. What's wrong?" Dark asked as he looked up from the mask that he was working on.

"Andrea and the boys caught me on the way back from my grandfather's and told me that we're going to be needed so I flew right over to get you."

"We're needed? For what?"

"I already told you about the witches who were visiting. Well, it seems like they're going to take down the protective barrier that surrounds Brynnhollow and replace it with one that can stand up to modern technology."

"That sounds like something that has the potential to go horribly wrong." Dark said frankly.

"Yeah, probably. And what's more is that they need for us to play a key part in their plan."

"What can *we* do?"

"Well, even though we're blocked from performing magic, we're still witches. From the way I understand it, they need for us to accept and store the magic that they will be using to recreate the barrier."

"How dangerous do you think that is?"

"Worst case?"

"Yeah."

"We could probably be completely disintegrated by it."

"Oh... what's the best case?"

"The barrier will be remade and everyone we love will be safe and happy for the rest of their lives because of it."

"But since Andrea asked you, you're automatically going to do it?"

"Since Andrea asked me, I'll automatically *consider* doing it, but before I committed to anything I wanted to come here to talk to you about it."

"What if I say no?"

"Then I'll say 'no' too. I'm not doing this without you."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really." Ares slowly responded, then explained, "I know that we haven't really talked too much about our relationship... I mean, in the longer term. But in my heart, I envision us growing old together and being in love with each other every step of the way."

"I kinda thought you might feel that way." Dark quietly admitted.

"Whatever happens, I want for it to happen to both of us. Whether it's the honor of helping to save the entire community or the disgrace of walking away from it, we'll go through it together." Ares said as he firmly held Dark's gaze.

"When you put it that way there really isn't much of a choice, is there?"

"Can you think of another way to put it?"

"No. I guess not."

"What do you say? Do you want to be a hero?"

"You mean like with cheering crowds and parades?"

"No. The other kind, where you know what you did, even if everyone else doesn't."

"Okay, yeah."

"You'll do it?"

"Yeah. I never really liked cheering crowds anyway. Too noisy."

"That's what I figured."

"So, if we're going to do this, what do we need to do first?"

"We're going to have to meet Andrea and the boys in Brynnhaven."

"Are you holding something back from me?"

"It's nothing too terrible..."

"Then why won't you tell me?"

"Because I know that you're not going to like it."

"What is it?"

"The only way we're going to get there in time is to transform."

"That's going to mean that we'll either have to stay transformed the whole time that we're there or we'll have to find clothes in Brynnhaven... a community of women." Dark said carefully.

"Yeah. That's the part that I thought you weren't going to like."

"But leaving that aside, there's no way that I'm going to be able to slither all the way to Brynnhaven before nightfall."

"I know. I thought of that too. It looks like I'm going to have to carry you."

"How is that going to work?"

"I was thinking that if you'll transform all the way down, as tightly as you can, then I'll transform between human and raven, small

enough so that I can fly, but also large enough to be able to carry you."

"Do you think that you can really do that?"

"I couldn't do it in my Karasu Tengu form, I know that much. But I *think* that I *might* be able to manage if I stop my transformation about halfway between Karasu Tengu and raven."

"Ares, tell me honestly, just how important is this?"

"I've lived on the outside. I have some idea of what tools they have at their disposal. Frankly, I'm surprised that they haven't discovered Brynnhollow already. If we're going to have any hope for the future, if we're going to pass anything on to Cain and Deimos, we've got to do whatever we can to make sure Brynnhollow remains hidden."

"Do we have time for a kiss?" Dark asked shyly.

"Yes. But we don't have time for what naturally follows. I'm going to have to give you a raincheck for that bit." Ares said warmly.

"I guess that gives me an extra incentive to survive, doesn't it?"

Ares let his Karasu Tengu form slip away so that he could give Dark a very naked, very enthusiastic kiss.

* * * * *

The sight of a large black bird carrying a snake through the air was a bit unusual.

When the primitive looking, oddly misshapen raven finally landed, it was something decidedly less than graceful.

The snake immediately freed itself from the clutching talons and began to transform.

"Ares! Are you alright?" Dark asked in panic as he assumed his 'Nāga' form.

"I didn't think it would be that difficult." Ares gasped as his Karasu Tengu form automatically filled out and lengthened his body.

"Are you okay?"

"I won't be able to hold that form again. It takes everything I've got."

"Ares. I don't know where we are. Before you go passing out on me, you need to tell me where we're going."

"I took you as far as I could. We're almost at the Brynnhaven drawbridge. Just follow this road. Andrea said that she'd meet us in Queen Marimba's garden."

"I don't know where that is. Are you going to be able to walk?"

"No. Not yet. I'm going to need a few minutes to catch my breath. That took everything that I had to give."

"If you'll transform down, I can carry you for a while."

"Thanks Dark. Just as soon as I've caught my breath, I'll walk on my own."

"Take as much time as you need. Hop on and enjoy the ride." Dark said warmly.

Rather than respond verbally, Ares forced himself into his full transformation.

Once he had stabilized in his raven form, Ares hopped onto Dark's shoulder and did his best not to dig his nails in as he fought to balance himself.

After a moment to be sure that Ares was settled in place, Dark started slithering at his best speed up the road.

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Since Dark didn't have to maintain eye contact with anyone at a 'human' level, he was free to travel in a more comfortable position in his half-snake form, with his chest low to the ground.

Once he was past the drawbridge, Dark was able to dart down the back streets and alleyways of Brynnhaven without notice.

There weren't many people out and about in Brynnhaven so Dark decided to keep things simple by staying out of sight as much as possible.

Dark finally came to rest in a little park area and considered asking Ares to transform and give him directions.

Just as he was about to ask, a shadow crossed overhead and he looked up to see a small dragon flying by.

Dark didn't so much as utter a word as he took off at his best possible speed to follow the familiar young Wyvern.

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Just when Dark thought that he had lost the trail, the Wyvern would appear again, showing him the way.

The sound of hoofbeats nearby suddenly made him realize that Deimos must be leading someone else, probably Jim, to their meeting place.

A moment later, Dark saw Jim, in his centaur form being ridden by Tannis who had transformed into a faun.

"I see that you guys got called in too." Dark called as he fought to keep up with Jim's pace.

"Yeah. Deimos said that they needed us." Jim answered as he slowed a little and allowed Dark to fall into place beside him.

"Ares came and got me." Dark said simply.

"I thought he'd be flying ahead, showing you the way, like Deimos is doing for us."

"Actually, the only reason we made it this far is because Ares carried me most of the way. It didn't end up working out as well as we would have liked, so he's resting up from it now."

"I guess sometimes you don't know how things are gonna work until you try them." Jim said simply as he looked toward the sky to see where Deimos was leading them.

"Something's wrong." Jim said as he suddenly slowed his pace.

"What?" Dark asked anxiously as he looked toward the sky for any indication of a problem.

What he saw was Deimos flying toward them at top speed.

"You guys need to wait here for a minute!" Deimos called out as he transformed to his half-form in mid-air.

"What's wrong!?" Jim called in return.

Deimos came in to land beside them as he said in a normal voice, "I just saw Cain and Grandpa Lowell. They're almost here. We need to give them a couple minutes to catch up to us."

"Did they run here all the way from your grandfather's house?" Dark asked with surprise.

"Yeah. As far as I know." Deimos said honestly.

"Wow! That must have been a tough run." Tannis said in wonder at their achievement.

Before anyone could respond, a wolf and a tiger striped dog-creature came into view, running up the street.

"Guys! Let's go the rest of the way together!" Jim called out in their direction.

The stripey dog stopped before them as he began to grow.

"How'd you get here so fast?" Deimos asked in his half-dragon saurial form.

"We ran. Do you have any water?" Cain panted.

"No. But do you remember the fountains in Queen Marimba's garden?"

"Yeah. That's right! Let's go! Grandpa Lowell and I need some water in the worst way." Cain said urgently.

"Are we ready to go?" Dark asked as he looked over their group.

"We're not helping anyone by sitting here." Deimos said before taking to the air to lead the way.

"Who put him in charge?" Dark asked, mostly rhetorically.

"He did, I think." Jim slowly answered, then asked, "Is he wrong? Do we need to wait here for something?"

"Nope. Let's go." Dark said, then glanced at Ares on his shoulder before slithering away at top speed.

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Dark was one of the slower members of the group but at no point was he in danger of being left behind.

When Dark finally arrived in Queen Marimba's garden, it was to the sight of everyone else in their animal transformations, slaking their thirsts at the fountain.

"Ready for a drink Ares?"

Ares response of a squawk not only was undoubtedly in the affirmative, but also proved that Ares must be feeling at least a little better.

As Dark slithered up to the edge of the fountain, Ares hopped off his shoulder to stand on the fountain's edge where he could help himself to the water.

Dark cupped his hands and took a slow, cool drink.

Ares, on the other hand, dunked his head, then raised it up and shook it vigorously.

Dark couldn't help but smile at the playful, frolicking mood that Ares seemed to have adopted.

He was actually tempted to go into his full snake transformation, but reasoned that, given their situation, one of them should stay in a fully communicative state to speak for them, if needed.

"Mom and Drake should be here any minute." Deimos announced to those gathered at the fountain.

Dark was surprised when Ares hopped away from the fountain, then began to grow.

"Is there anything else we need to know before we go?" Ares asked cautiously.

"No. I'm pretty sure that all we're going to have to do is show up." Deimos said honestly.

"Yeah. It sounded to me like all we're going to do is stand around like a bunch of buckets, waiting to be filled up and emptied out." Cain added.

"What do you think the chances are that we're going to be enough to hold all the extra magic that they're going to have?" Dark asked cautiously.

Before anyone could answer, a white swan landed in their midsts and began to transform.

"We're just the beginning." Andrea said as she was coming into her white oskmey form, then continued, "We're going to pass the magic on and share it with everyone else in Brynnhollow. But the most important thing is that we're going to be the ones who control the flow. We're going to be opening and closing the floodgates so that we can protect the people further down the line."

"Were you able to get Uncle Drake?" Cain asked his mother with concern.

"He's arranging for someone to watch after Ollie and Viv. He'll be along as soon as that's taken care of." Andrea assured him, then thought to ask, "How did you get here so quickly?"

"We ran. It's what we do." Cain said simply.

"An old dog is still a dog." Lowell stated with a weary growling chuckle.

"I wouldn't want for you to take the chance of hurting yourself by pushing too hard, but I'm glad you made it." Andrea said honestly.

"Do you need to rest for a while before we go on?" Ares asked his grandfather with concern.

"Werewolves are more durable than you imagine. Do what you need to do and I promise you that I'll be there when I'm needed." Lowell said confidently.

As Ares was about to respond, the movement of a shadow across the grass drew his eye upward.

He smiled at the majestic sight of Drake, in his Baphomet half-form, gliding through the air on large leathery bat wings.

"It looks like that's everyone. Unless anyone has something else, we can go now." Andrea announced to the group.

When no one immediately responded, Andrea transformed fully into a swan before taking to the air.

"As much as I'd like to ride the rest of the way on your shoulder, it's probably best if I lead our way from the air. That way no one else will have to wait on us." Ares said frankly.

"I've been keeping up fairly well, but it's a good plan, just in case." Dark said seriously.

"Just don't worry if you lose sight of the others. I'll make sure you don't get lost." Ares said before completing his transformation into a raven.

Dark decided to go fully into his snake form so that he would be able to follow along at maximum speed.

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Dark was so distracted by the sudden overwhelming sense of disquiet that he inadvertently crossed under Jim's legs and was nearly stepped on.

When he realized what he was doing, Dark quickly shifted to his half-form and said, "Sorry Jim."

"Are you feeling that?" Jim asked anxiously.

"Yes. It's like every nerve in my body is being irritated at once." Dark said honestly.

"I couldn't think of how to describe it, but that's what I'm feeling too." Jim said irritably.

"Listen! Everyone! We're near the vinculum. Just keep going and it'll get easier once we're inside." Andrea called out.

"Is there going to be room for all of us inside of it?" Dark asked worriedly.

"I don't know... I haven't been there yet. Conrad just told me where it is." Andrea admitted.

"If it gets too bad, we can go back to Queen Marimba's garden and Conrad can meet with us there." Dark said reasonably.

"Conrad mentioned the bad feeling, but I didn't know it was going to be quite this bad." Andrea admitted.

"If he's not there when we get there, I'm going to turn back. I can't stand this feeling for any length of time." Ares said frankly.

"From what Conrad told me, this next courtyard should be it."

"Can you fly back and get us when he shows up? Me and Grandpa Lowell can't stay here like this." Cain announced.

"Lowell? Are you okay?" Andrea asked as she forced herself to press forward.

"I can do this if I have to, but I won't stay for no good reason." Lowell said firmly.

"He isn't here." Andrea said anxiously as she looked around the open courtyard.

"Where's that chamber you were talking about?" Ares asked as he looked around.

"Over there, I think." Andrea said, making no move toward the ornately carved stone structure.

Although the feeling deep within him told him that he would rather do just about anything besides walking up to that door, throughout his life, Ares had forced himself to do many painful and unpleasant things, simply because they needed to be done.

That being the case, Ares resigned himself to the task and slowly stepped forward in his Karasu Tengu form.

As Ares approached the blank archway, it suddenly changed, revealing a large room with a table and benches inside.

"Ares! I didn't expect you so soon." Conrad said as he stepped through the doorway.

"Yeah. We're all here, but I don't know for how long. Every single one of us wants to run as far away from this place as we can get."

"*I humbly call upon Cernunnos, horned god of the animals who protects us, in the name of Angus MacOg, his devoted follower, to suspend the warning during the assembly of the Magi. I use the power granted by gods, I am the Guardian.*" Conrad called toward the sky.

Ares and Dark shared a disbelieving look as the eerie creepy feeling evaporated into nothingness.

"Thank you, Agent Fastbeck." Ares said appreciatively.

"You can call me Conrad. We're practically family."

"You're dating my ex-wife. I'm not sure that qualifies."

"I don't know why it wouldn't. We both care deeply for the same people. Isn't that what families do?"

"Well, maybe. But aren't the two of us supposed to hate each other or something?"

"If you had mistreated Andrea or the boys in any way, it would be very easy for me to hate you for it. But the way things turned out, you're an important person in the lives of the people I love... can we do this later? I mean, like when everyone isn't watching?"

"No need. I think we're good."

"Yeah." Conrad agreed.

"So what do we need to do next?"

"I'm going to introduce you to your Magi and the spellcasters who you will be working with. It may be a few minutes before everyone's ready to talk to you, so I suggest that you kick back and relax while you have the chance." Conrad said before stepping back into the vinculum chamber.

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"Are you alright?" Dark asked Ares quietly.

"I just feel like there's something wrong with me for not being mad at Conrad. I feel like I should hate him... or at least resent him or something."

"Just feel what you feel and don't worry about what you think other people *expect*."

"Easier said than done."

"I guess so." Dark said noncommittally, then quietly asked, "Does it bother you that he's in charge of things?"

"No. He's from the FBI. Even if he didn't have leadership training, he has the authority and experience to do the job.

"I don't mean logically. I'm asking if you resent the fact that he's the one who's going to save your friends and family."

Ares thought for a moment, then quietly said, "I really don't think so. I mean, sure, I'd like to be the one who makes everything all better for everyone, but realistically, I'm not the guy who can do that. I think that maybe Conrad is. Either way, I'll help him to make this work however I can."

"Good. I just wanted to be sure where your head was before we were called upon to do anything important."

"How about you? How committed are you to this?"

"The man I love asked me to face death at his side. Let's just say that I'm 'all in'."

"Love?"

"Yeah." Dark confirmed, then let out an involuntary laugh and said, "Anyone else would be freaking out on the word 'death'."

"I guess that means that I'm not just anyone."

"No. I think it's safe to say that you're someone special."

* * * * *

"Everyone! Just so you know, yours is the first group to assemble. If all goes to plan, before long we'll be having gatherings like this one in the other two barriers." Conrad called to the group of mostly half animal beings.

"We all rushed to be here, so what do you need for us to do?" Ares called in return.

"For those of you who haven't been introduced, this is Paul." Conrad said, indicating the fifteen year old boy at his side.

"Hi." Paul said uncomfortably, although, to his credit, he didn't fidget or try to hide behind Conrad.

"Paul will be summoning the natural magic of the world and using it to release the stored magic of the three barriers."

Before Ares could formulate a question, Conrad motioned for someone to step out of the vinculum chamber.

"For those of you who haven't met him, this gentleman's name is D, he's Paul's father. He will be one of those commanding the stored magic that Paul will be releasing."

"It's good to see you again, Ares. What do you think about if next time, maybe you and the boys could come over to our place to visit?""

"Yeah, but if you could arrange it so that it isn't a life-threatening emergency, that'd be great." Ares said frankly.

"No promises." D said with a slight grin.

"So are you going to be recasting our barrier?"

"I'm going to be playing a part in it, but I won't be the one leading the effort. I'll be happy to leave that honor to Miss Oaken, mostly in deference to her familiarity with the existing barrier."

"Is there anything that we need to know about our part in all of this?" Ares asked anxiously.

"Yes. We're fortunate that things have unfolded as they have. You've been asked to take the lead among the people from Brynnhollow. When asked, I had to admit that you were the person that I got to know the best and had come to trust the most. That

type of rapport is necessary for the spell that we will be using." D explained.

"Okay. That actually makes sense to me." Ares said seriously.

"Good. The only other thing that you need to know is that you're going to have an insane flood of magic coming from me to you. When it hits, you're going to need to feed it out to your closest friends and loved ones. They, in turn, will pass it on to others. Once all those connections have been completed, then you can release the 'tamed' magic to friends and acquaintances within the community."

"Tamed magic?" Ares asked cautiously.

"Magic, at its root, isn't good or evil. It's simply is. But it *can* be given intent, turned to a purpose. If a community were suddenly flooded with raw, 'untamed' magic, it's likely that the magic they receive would be twisted and perverted a hundred different ways, based on each person's desire."

"So you think having me get hold of the magic first will do... something?"

"I expect that the magic will carry your desire for the survival of your family and your community. That intent will then be passed on to everyone downstream from you and when the magic is retrieved, it will be possible to turn it to benevolent use."

"So that's how it is... Okay. I understand now."

Chapter 44

"For those of you who haven't met him yet, this is my coworker from the FBI, Agent Shawn Roberts." Conrad announced to the gathering.

Ares watched and waited, not sure what fresh new surprises Conrad had in store for them.

"For whatever reason, it turns out that Shawn will be working to help the people of Brynnhollow."

"How is that going to work as far as our mutual respect and taming the magic?" Ares asked before he could think better of it.

"Not a problem. What really matters is what's between you and D. I just stopped in to make introductions and answer what questions I could. The Wudewas should just about be gathered by now so I need to go do the same thing with them." Conrad said frankly.

"What do we have to do next?" Ares asked quickly, before Agent Fastbeck could leave.

"Think about your friends and acquaintances in Brynnhollow so that when the time comes to share the magical flow, you won't have to cast around in a panic." Conrad said simply, then turned and stepped through the archway.

"I'll do as much as I can to keep you from being too overwhelmed." D promised.

"Just speak up if it's too much. I can help too." Paul quickly added.

Ares looked at the father and son for a moment, then said in realization, "I think it's going to be okay."

* * * * *

"Are you doing what he said? Thinking of people?" Dark asked quietly from Ares side.

"Yes. Even though I don't know everyone in Brynnhollow, there are people like Carn and Mason who do. I know that if I direct a significant flow toward them that they'll be able to spread the magic far and wide."

Ares noticed that Paul had gone to talk with Cain, Deimos, Jim and Tannis. It filled him with contentment to see the boys from such different backgrounds getting along so well.

"Part of me just wants to protect them." Dark said distantly as he followed Ares' gaze.

"I know. No matter how old they get, they'll always be my little boys."

"Another part of me is convinced that *they're* the ones who are going to protect *us*."

"I think that's the point of all of this. We're all going to have to care for each other. That's the only way it's going to work."

"You guys hang on for just a minute. Don't go anywhere, I'll be right back." Agent Roberts said quickly before dashing away.

"Actually, I have quite a lot to prepare before it gets too late. Please make my apologies to Shawn if he notices. We'll speak again later." D said as he quietly followed Agent Roberts into the vinculum chamber.

"What do you suppose that's all about?" Dark asked as he watched D go through the archway.

"I don't know, but from his expression I'd say that it's probably not something too urgent. I wouldn't worry too much about it." Ares said speculatively.

"Dad! Paul said that I did my fire spell just right and he's even gonna show me how to do it with demon magic!" Deimos said excitedly.

"That's only if you say it's okay." Paul interjected, letting it be known to all that Ares had the final say in the matter.

After a moment to consider, Ares finally said, "Yes. But only after the barrier spells are done."

"But Daa-ad!" Deimos whined.

"Work first, then play." Ares said firmly.

"He's right, Demi. We need to stay focused on what we're doing to be sure that it's done right." Paul said seriously.

"Okay. Just remember, you promised." Deimos said sternly.

"I'll remember." Paul swore, then looked back at the archway with surprise.

"Ares! There's someone that I want you to meet." Agent Roberts said quickly.

Ares and Dark stared wide-eyed at the ten-foot tall beastly monster following Agent Roberts.

Time seemed to stand still as Ares and Dark stared disbelievingly at the Bigfoot monster before them. Rhuru-wra appeared no less shocked by the Karasu Tengu and Nāga looking back at him.

"This is Rhuru-wra. He's another bridge, like you. He's going to take on the magic and share it with his people." Agent Roberts said pleasantly.

"It's nice to meet you..." Ares said uncertainly as he looked up into the gentle beast's eyes.

"Rhuru-wra can't understand our language, but he wanted to meet you anyway."

"If he can't speak our language, how do you know what he wants?"

"Agent Fastbeck can speak his language... well supposedly, Agent Fastbeck can speak and understand all languages, but we haven't had a chance to test that out yet." Agent Roberts explained.

As Ares looked deeply into Rhuru-wra's soft brown eyes, he caught, just for an instant, what Rhuru-wra was feeling.

"Whether you call us bridges or heroes, we're just the ones who care enough to risk ourselves to help our people." Ares carefully explained.

Rhuru-wra rumbled a soft, inquisitive growl that made Ares freeze in thought.

"I can get Agent Fastbeck to translate for us if you want." Agent Roberts reluctantly offered.

"No. I understood... well, not the words, but I got the sentiment."

"I do that too, sometimes." Agent Roberts admitted.

"Rhuru-wra wanted to know if I'd be willing to put myself at the same risk if I were helping his people instead of my own."

"That's a tough question." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Would I risk my life to save people I don't know? At what point is my life more valuable to me than the lives of people that I don't know or at least don't know very well?"

Rhuru-wra growled long and slow as he looked Ares in the eyes.

"Thanks." Ares responded with relief, then told Agent Roberts, "Rhuru-wra let me off the hook and told me I didn't have to answer."

"It's still a good question. It seems like one of those things that could help you later on if you take the time to think about it now."

"That might be the case if you were capable of turning off your emotions and accepting whatever you came up with as 'decided'. But I'm pretty sure that a thinking feeling person caught in that

moment would still have to wrestle with the decision, regardless of how much he had considered it beforehand."

"Still, I think it best to have already sorted out what you believe in such a circumstance. Otherwise you'll be more likely to react emotionally since you don't have any logical arguments already made upon which to base a justification."

Rhuru-wra growled and yipped a contribution to their conversation.

"He wants to know..." Ares started, but was interrupted.

"...about the third bridge. Yes. I'm beginning to understand him." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Do you know if they've decided who it's going to be?" Ares prompted.

"I don't know if that's been decided yet." Agent Roberts slowly responded.

"Before we go any further, we need to talk to whoever it's going to be." Ares said firmly, then turned to find Rhuru-wra nodding in agreement.

"What's the rush all of a sudden?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

Before Ares could answer, Rhuru-wra forcefully growled a response.

"Yeah! What he said!" Ares said determinedly.

After a moment to consider, Agent Roberts finally said, "Okay. I guess that I can't argue with logic like that. Stay right here for a minute and I'll see what I can find out for you."

"Hold on! Whoever it turns out to be, we don't just need to know who he is, we need to talk to him. I don't know everything about all the other spells you're going to be doing, but the three of us, the 'bridges', need to work it out so that we'll all know what each other are doing. What we're trying to achieve." Ares fought to explain.

"Got it. I'll be right back." Agent Roberts said before dashing away.

Ares watched as Agent Roberts entered the vinculum chamber, then turned to Rhuru-wra and said, "I don't know where that came from. I really don't know anything about magic."

Rhuru-wra growled, even though Ares could guess what he was going to say.

"Yeah. I know. But I still don't like feeling like I'm not in control of my own actions." Ares said irritably.

Rhuru-wra gave a low growl followed by a sound that could almost be described as a chirp.

Ares carefully considered for a moment, then slowly said, "I guess you're right. We've been given a chance. Even if we have to jump through some hoops, if it helps the people we love..."

"Guys, we've got a call out to the other bridge. It turns out that he's one of the Archdruid's brothers." Agent Roberts said as he hurried to rejoin them.

"Good. That should be all that we'll need to prepare. As soon as the three of us are sure that we're all on the same page, we should be ready for business."

"Just what is it that the three of you are going to be doing?"

"We're going to 'tune' the magic so that it will be ready to use when it's needed."

"I thought you didn't know anything about magic." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"I don't. That's just what Rhuru-wra told me."

"But he doesn't know anything about magic either."

"True." Ares easily agreed, then added, "What's more, I don't even know what we're going to say to this person who's going to be working with us."

Rhuru-wra let loose with a quick growl ending in something of a whimper.

"He doesn't know either." Ares added.

"Yeah. I heard him." Agent Roberts said to Ares, then turned to Rhuru-wra and said, "I'm not sure if Conrad, Jarvis and I all got the same gift of translation or if you're just very expressive and relatable, but I can understand most of what you're saying. I get the feeling that you can understand us too."

Rhuru-wra growled a quiet response.

"Well, yeah. I think the general idea is the most any of us could hope for in a situation like this." Ares responded.

"Friend-Shawn, a team has been dispatched to retrieve the one you seek. He whom you seek should join us shortly."

Ares eyes went wide at the *literal* monster that had stepped through the doorway. To Ares eyes, the being before him seemed to be a grotesque monstrosity that had been assembled from moldy, half-decomposed bits and pieces of several different bodies resulting in a freakishly tall being with multiple arms, fanned out almost like wings.

"Reaper? Did you *mean* to stop casting your illusion?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"The time will soon be upon us when other concerns will take precedence. Rather than expect others to adapt to my appearance under those conditions, it is better that I present my true self now."

A loud growl from Rhuru-wra drew all attention.

"Well, of course *you'd* agree with him." Ares responded playfully.

"Whilst I am here I must retrieve Balthasar so that we may return to our preparations." Reaper said seriously, then looked to Rhuru-wra and continued, "It pleases me to know that we will be able to do this for you and your people."

Rhuru-wra growled seriously in response.

"Yes. Regardless of species, we are all brothers of a kind." Reaper said wistfully.

"I'm ready if you are." Paul said as he walked to Reaper's side.

"I believe that I would enjoy visiting for a while longer, but regrettably, we have obligations." Reaper regretfully explained.

"Do you think it would be better if I changed too?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Consider your appearance whilst using the height of your powers. If that is likely to cause distraction for those in close proximity to you, attempting to perform spellcasting, then consider allowing them the courtesy of time to adjust."

"Yeah. When you put it like that I probably should, just to be safe." Paul said in a conflicted tone.

"Anyone who knows you won't be bothered by it either way." Ares quietly assured him.

Paul slowly began to morph into his demonic visage, horns and all.

"When the magic hits us, what's going to happen to the rest of us? Are we all going to transform into our full animal forms all of a sudden?" Ares thought to ask.

Reaper and Paul shared a concerned look before Reaper finally explained, "That which happens when you experience the most stress and lose control is the most likely outcome."

"We're going to have to be sure that anyone with an aquatic animal form is close to someplace safe for them." Ares said anxiously.

"Without phones or radios, that could take a lot more time than we have." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Deimos? Can you come over here for a minute?" Ares asked loudly.

"Yeah. What's going on, Dad?" Deimos asked as he broke away from the group of boys.

"Will you fly into Brynnhollow and let Carn know that here in a little while that it's possible that people will suddenly start changing into their animal forms, maybe without warning. Tell him to be sure that people with aquatic forms are near water for the next few hours." Ares explained as the boys slowly gathered around.

"They're probably going to ask me all kinds of questions about what's going on." Deimos said cautiously.

"Tell them what you can, then get back here. I want you close by when the magic starts flowing." Ares said firmly.

"Is there anything I can do?" Cain asked as he stepped to his twin brother's side.

Ares was about to say that there wasn't, but suddenly changed his mind.

"Go find Queen Marimba and tell her all about what's going on."

"Doesn't she already know? She can see the future, can't she?."

"Yes. In fact, according to your mom, she can see more than one possible future. So the best thing we can do right now is let her know which future is playing out so that she can react properly to it."

"Can someone go with me? I mean, she's kinda creepy." Cain asked uncomfortably.

"Good idea. Jim and Tannis can go with you if you want. Just be sure to come back as quickly as possible. I want you here when the ceremony starts."

"We're almost in her back yard. It won't take us long." Cain assured his father.

"Good. Then go." Ares said to his sons, then watched as they both hurried away.

* * * * *

As Ares, Dark, Reaper and Paul walked toward the Vinculum archway, a man's voice tentatively asked, "Shawn? Are you out here"

"Yeah. Sorry Otis, I didn't mean to be gone so long. Come on over here and meet Ares, the bridge for Brynnhollow. It's actually good that you're here. When things get crazy, I may need for you to take a message to him." Agent Roberts said as he motioned for the man to join him.

"Um... I don't..." Otis stammered.

Agent Roberts followed his frozen stare that was fixed on Reaper.

"Oh, yeah. You met Reaper earlier, but this is how he really looks. What you were seeing before was just an illusion to make us comfortable with him." Agent Roberts explained.

"Sorry. I didn't mean..."

"Don't worry about it. We're all making adjustments to lots of new things." Ares assured him.

Otis glanced in Ares direction, then gave him a small grateful smile.

As Otis walked to Agent Roberts' side, Paul and Reaper walked past him and through the archway.

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Between Ares and Agent Roberts, they were able to fill in quite a few of the blanks for Otis as to who and *what* the people were that he had encountered thus far.

"Did someone out here need me?" A man asked as he poked his head through the doorway, interrupting their conversation.

"That depends. Who *are* you?" Ares asked uncertainly.

"This is Den Markura, he's one of Archdruid Highley's brothers." Agent Roberts explained, then to Den he said, "I think you're going to be one of the bridges that's being used to distribute magic amongst the people of the protectorate."

"But I'm not a... Um... I mean, I'm just a human." Den stammered.

"You're also a practicing druid who has been empowered to bestow blessings." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Well, yeah. For what good *that* does."

"As I understand it, over time a priest can develop the capacity to manipulate true magic in the form of blessings and curses. I believe that we're working under the assumption that you'll be able to channel magic in the form of blessings and that when it's needed, those whom you have blessed will be able to store and release those blessings back into the world, in the form of benevolent 'tamed' magic." Agent Roberts fought to explain.

"I don't have the first clue what you're talking about."

"If you'll agree to it, we would like for you to act as a bridge between the magic users and the people of the protectorate, both the Nephilim and the blessed congregation." Agent Roberts said more simply.

"Isn't this the kind of thing you keep Jarvis around for?" Den reluctantly asked.

"He's going to be needed elsewhere. Do you think you'll be able to manage it?"

"I don't know."

"Den, a lot of people are going to be counting on you. Not just the Nephilim, but also the Brynns, the Wudewas and the people of Waxell."

"No pressure." Otis interjected.

Den glanced at him uncertainly, then broke into a reluctant grin.

"I thought so. As much as you pretend to be oblivious or not to give a damn, at the core you're actually a do-gooder like the rest of us." Agent Roberts laughed.

"Yeah. Yeah. Just don't spread it around. The people back home count on me to be the level headed voice of reason. If they found out that I was acting like some big boyscout, they'd probably never trust me with anything serious again."

"I don't know how much sense that makes, but I'm buying it." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"So where do we need to be and what do we need to be doing right now?" Otis asked curiously.

"Now that we've got all the bridges together, I think they probably have a lot to discuss. As far as I know, everyone else is meeting with their groups right now, making plans or crafting spells. I need to talk to Conrad and Jarvis for a minute. You can hang out here if you want. I shouldn't be too long."

"Do you need for me to do anything?"

"Just wait here. If there's something for you to do, I'm pretty sure that it'll find you." Agent Roberts said confidently, then walked to the arch.

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When Ares noticed Den's uncomfortable expression, he quietly asked, "How are you doing?"

"If you guys are going to expect me to do something, you're going to need to fill me in on what it is. Telling me that I need to be a bridge doesn't really tell me a whole lot."

"I know. I wish I could fill you in on all of what's going on, but I don't know much more about it than you do."

"Tell me what you *do* know."

"The witches of Brynnhollow have been cursed to prevent them from accessing their magic... for the most part, anyway. But even if we can't perform magic like uncursed witches, we *can* act as storage containers for magic. We're designed to contain and process that power, so we're ideal for storing the magical deluge that they're planning on releasing to us." Ares carefully explained.

"Okay... I think I got that." Den said slowly.

"Good. *My* part in all of this is that they're going to direct a large magical flow at me and I'm going to share it with the people who I trust, love and respect. The magic will flow through me to them and on to the people that each of them love and trust."

"And that's what you want me to do? I'm not a witch. If you turn a flood of magic toward me, I'll probably just be blown away by it." Den said frankly.

"All I can figure is that you must have a really good support network. As far as I know, my primary qualification for doing this is my relationship of trust and respect with one of the people who will be directing the magic when it's released."

"The only people involved in this that I've said more than two words to are Jarvis and Shawn. As far as I know, neither of them will be releasing or directing magic."

"No." Agent Roberts said simply.

None in attendance had noticed him stepping through and didn't know how long he had been standing there

"Your Magi will be Reaper and your spellcasters will be Dag Hansen and Jarrell Couleigh. I don't know what the qualifications are for someone to be a bridge, but maybe they do. I just know that they wouldn't have chosen you if you weren't the exact right person for the job." Agent Roberts explained.

"But what am I supposed to *do*?" Den asked imploringly.

"Rhuru-wra and I are bridges just like you and we don't know any more of what's expected of us than you do." Ares said frankly.

Rhuru-wra let out a long slow bleating growl to confirm what Ares was saying.

"So he's a bigfoot and he's going to spread magic to other bigfoots." Den said slowly.

"That's the plan." Ares said frankly.

"And you're a witch who will spread the magic given to you amongst the other witches." Den said as he looked seriously at Ares.

"Yeah." Ares cautiously agreed.

"So why don't you have one of the nephilim doing this instead of me?" Den asked curiously.

"Mainly because we couldn't trust them to work with us. Once they had unfettered access to the magic, they would most likely turn it to their own use." Agent Roberts said grimly.

"But you trust *me*?" Den asked incredulously.

"Well, to be honest, after evaluating all the choices before us, we came to the conclusion that you're the guy. If we're going to move forward with this, we're going to need your help." Agent Roberts finished firmly.

"But I'm not a witch. I can't manipulate magic like you do." Den reminded him.

"From the way it was explained to me, over time religious people naturally... or maybe supernaturally, gain the capacity to process and store magic. Those who function as religious leaders have the ability that much more so."

"Okay. I'll grant you that, but why *me*?" Den insisted.

"Jarvis would have been our first choice, but the Magi are going to need him with them when the ceremony starts. The Nephilim are disqualified, due to their inherent natures. The congregants are disqualified due to their inability to do the job. That leaves you and your brothers as the only people able to process the magic of the protectorate." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"Then why don't you choose Jud?"

"A bridge has to have a certain personality type. From everything that I've heard, you have it. Jud doesn't."

"Wait. Are you saying that Den and Rhuru-wra have the same personality type that I do?" Ares asked cautiously.

"Yes. That's what I'm saying. Den, will you do it? Yes or no?" Agent Roberts asked firmly.

"Um... yeah? I guess..." Den slowly responded.

"Good. You guys work it out. I need to get back to the Magi."

"Problem?"

"I don't think so, but it turns out that I'm seeing to the coordination of a lot of different things. Right now I think that everything is going okay, but I wouldn't count on it staying that way."

"Before you go, isn't there someone better that you can ask to be the Nevermore bridge?"

"No. There isn't." Agent Roberts said before stepping through the archway.

"So, if I'm understanding what they're saying, I'm not needed here for anything." Dark said simply.

"First of all, they don't know everything. It looks to me like they're making up most of this as they go along. Second, *I* need you. I won't do this alone so don't even *think* about trying to back out on me."

"But they don't need me here."

"If they need me, they need you. They might not know it yet, but they do." Ares said firmly.

"Okay. Got it. I won't duck out on you in the middle of all this. I promise."

"I'd appreciate that."

"Well, it sounds like *you've* got a plan, but I'm not sure what *I'm* supposed to do." Den said frankly.

"Think about the people that you'll share magic with when you're hit by the sudden rush." Ares said seriously.

"I grew up here. I know the members of the church. So my first impulse would be to share with my brothers, then the congregation. I suppose after all that, I'll share with the Nephilim, even though I don't really know any of them."

"Make sure you tell Agent Roberts about that. It might be as simple as having one of the nephilim with you when you're dishing out the magic." Ares said firmly.

After a moment to consider, Den quietly said, "Actually, that could work."

A growl from Rhuru-wra drew both their attention.

"Good point." Ares agreed, then looked to Den and said, "There's no reason for us to stay in Brynnhollow. If it'll help you connect with your people, we can go to *your* realm."

"That place is as foreign to me as this one is. I just don't think that I'm the right person for the job."

"Maybe that's one of the qualifications." Otis quietly suggested.

"Actually, it could be." Ares reluctantly admitted.

"I think I remember them saying that you needed to talk to me about something. What was that all about?" Den cautiously asked.

"We were just wanting to make sure that all three of us are doing the same thing when we... process the magic. It's going to be important that all the magic be usable when we're done with it." Ares said frankly.

Rhuru-wra let loose a long chattering barking growl that was very expressive.

"He makes a good point." Ares said thoughtfully.

"What point was that? I missed it." Dark asked cautiously.

"If we were all supposed to do exactly the same thing in the same way, there wouldn't be any reason for three of us to do this." Ares said as he looked around at his companions.

"From the sound of it, it would be too dangerous for one person." Otis offered.

"If that were the case then they'd have one of us leading a group to manage a coordinated effort. This is something else."

"A ritual." Den hesitantly offered.

Rhuru-wra growled a quick response.

When no one translated, Dark cautiously asked, "What?"

"He said that all of this is a ritual." Ares said thoughtfully, then looked at Dark and added, "He's right. Everything we're doing right now needs to be done. Figuring this out is actually a step in the overall project."

"So, are you saying that we're already performing the ritual, even though we're not aware of it?" Otis asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. And what's more, it looks like we're each going to be accomplishing the same thing in different ways. That's why we had to get together to compare notes, so we could realize that. If the

rest of us tried to process magic the same way that Den's going to do it, it wouldn't be useable when it's needed."

"Wait! I still don't know what it is that I'm doing!" Den objected.

"Tell me, when the surge of magic hits you, what do you think you're going to do with it?" Ares persisted.

"I don't know! The only thing I know how to do with magic is to use it for a blessing. I don't know what good it would do if I did that, but I really don't have any other magical abilities." Den finished anxiously.

"You don't need any. You've got exactly what you need. That's why you're here." Ares said with a smile of accomplishment.

Rhuru-wra gave a quick supportive growl of affirmation.

"But what good does that do anyone?" Den asked in puzzlement.

"By 'taming' the magic and turning it into blessings, you make it possible for regular 'blessed' humans to store the excess magic." Ares said simply.

"I guess it *could* work that way." Den reluctantly agreed.

"You mentioned your brothers earlier. Can they bestow blessings too?" Dark asked quietly.

"Yes. Our father trained all of us the same way."

"Then it sounds like you'll have everything you need to perform your part of the spell." Ares finished with a smile.

"What about you guys?"

"I'm a witch, so I was born with the capacity to process and store magic. From what I've been told, I'll be expected to 'tame' the magic by 'flavoring' it with benevolence and good wishes, but the hardest part is already done for me. The entire population of Brynnhollow is already hard-wired to do *exactly* what we're planning to do."

"What about Rhuru-wra?" Otis asked hesitantly as he looked at the Bigfoot.

After a long growled and chittered response, Ares translated, "From the sound of it, his people have a low-level psychic ability. They aren't exactly telepathic, but they all share a 'group awareness', almost on a subconscious level. Rhuru-wra believes that he'll be able to channel the magic into that and share it evenly amongst his people. He won't tame it as much as his whole colony will flavor the magic with their collective intent."

"So do we just have to wait for them to be ready for us to do our part?" Den asked cautiously.

"I think that we need to make ourselves ready. I need to get all my support people together with me and spend some time with them. When the time comes for me to share magic with them, I need for our bond to be as strong as possible."

Rhuru-wra slowly growled in a low rumbling tone.

"He wants to gather a few of his people together and tell them what's going on. He wants to prepare them for what's to come." Ares translated.

"I guess I should probably do that too." Den said in a wavering tone.

"You've got two different groups to help, don't you?" Ares asked cautiously.

"Yeah. The part with my brothers and the congregation doesn't bother me. Having to work with the Nephilim... the only contact I've ever had with them was through my father. They're so...alien... I can't see myself linking with them or 'trusting' them. They're monsters."

Rhuru-wra immediately spoke up, obviously in offense.

"No. Of course not. I've gotten to know you and I'd never think of you that way."

Rhuru-wra let loose a slight growl, but even Dark and Otis caught the meaning of it.

"Yeah. I'll go talk to them and try to get to know them. Hopefully it'll be enough to get the job done." Den said anxiously.

"Actually, I have a feeling that it's probably the only way to get *this* job done." Ares said frankly.

"If the Nephilim have really been kept hidden, then there's probably no other way that it *could* work, is there?" Dark asked curiously.

"I don't really know much about it, but it sounds that way." Ares said, then looked at Den inquisitively.

"Jarvis is the only one who talks to the Nephilim regularly. He might know of something else we could do, but as far as I know, you're right. This is the only way that the Nephilim *and* the congregation could have both been utilized." Den said thoughtfully.

"Go find Jarvis and talk to him, see what insights he can provide. Maybe he can even recommend one of the Nephilim for you to talk to and get to know." Ares slowly suggested.

"Yeah. That sounds like a good idea." Den admitted, then quietly added, "At least it's a place to start."

"I can go with you if you want." Otis volunteered.

Den looked at the relative stranger with surprise at the offer.

"Ares has someone here to help him and bounce ideas off of. Maybe it'd help you to have the same thing." Otis explained, then added, "Besides that, I don't really have anything else to do. Maybe if I tag along with you there'll be something that I can do to help."

"Yeah. Sure. Thanks." Den said choppily, then turned to the others and said, "I'm going to go back to the protectorate now and see what I can arrange. Send someone to get me if you make any discoveries or need anything."

"Count on it." Ares said with a smile.

After a glance at Otis to see that he was ready, Den led the way to the archway.

Chapter 45

"Are you guys done already?" Archdruid Highley asked with concern as Den and Otis stepped through the archway.

"I think we're done with the part that we needed to be together for." Den responded, then thought to ask, "Do you know who of the Nephilim I should talk to about sharing magic with their people?"

"Reaper would know about that better than I would. Although I speak with the Nephilim on occasion, that's mostly just formal inquiries, not anything of substance or real consequence." Archdruid Highley said frankly.

"There are only three Nephilim I know of who would be able to speak with you in your own language. Of course I am one, the second is currently dead and the third... would likely be less than receptive to the idea of working with a human." Reaper said slowly.

"When you were talking with Rhuru-wra you seemed to be getting most of what he was saying." Otis hesitantly offered.

"That's true." Den agreed.

"Well, if that's the case, would you have any objection to talking with Linnaeus?" Archdruid Highley asked curiously.

"Who's that?" Den asked hesitantly.

"The Nephilim who carried you here when I came to get you." Archdruid Highley said slowly.

"Oh, yeah. He seemed nice. I just didn't catch his name." Den said uncertainly.

"Linnaeus is my demi-brother." Reaper interjected. "I would expect him to be in close proximity to the Vinculum Chamber, just in the event that he might be needed. He's conscientious that way. Were

you to go through that archway, I am certain that he would be attentive and willing to help you in any way that he is able."

"Can we come back here if that doesn't work out?" Den asked to be certain.

"Of course. Just go talk to Linnaeus and see if you can get the answers that you're looking for." Archdruid Highley said simply.

"Do you still want to go with me?" Den asked Otis hesitantly.

"Sure. This looks like one of those things that you probably shouldn't do all on your own." Otis confirmed with a smile.

"No matter how you look at it, there only seems to be one way to go, so we might as well get to it." Den said resignedly as he took a step toward the Protectorate archway.

"Right behind you." Otis said as he literally followed a step behind.

"*I humbly ask that you grant entry to one who serves. I am the keeper.*" Archdruid Highley said firmly.

All present watched as Den and Otis stepped through the archway.

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"Is that how things are supposed to be working out?" Milo asked his companions sitting at the table.

"I think maybe they're on the right track." Paul responded.

"According to the knowledge, they are behaving correctly." Reaper added.

"Well, I'm glad that someone is. I still don't know what we're supposed to be doing." Milo said frankly.

"Do you really want to know? Because I can tell you. I just don't think you'll really want to hear it." Paul asked irritably.

Most of those around the room ignored Paul's raised voice. However, D, Professor Everstone and Archdruid Highley looked up from their quiet conversation to see what was going on.

"Yeah. I *really* want to know." Milo finally responded.

"Reaper and I are waiting for you to stop play acting that you're some weak powerless 'almost human' and let loose with your *real* magic." Paul said impatiently as he noticed Agents Roberts and Fastbeck entering the room from the Southseid archway.

"According to the arcane knowledge, Gaspar is the Magi of Volition. Such turmoil and misgivings are a fundamental part of his nature. Were it otherwise, he would not qualify as a Magi." Reaper stated firmly.

"Okay. I get that." Paul said to Reaper, then turned to Milo and continued, "Listen, I'm not mad and I don't hate you or anything like that. I can just see that you're holding yourself back and you're making it so much harder than it has to be."

After a long moment of looking around at all the expectant faces, most notably that of Archdruid Highley, Milo finally quietly asked, "Do you really want to see what I've been hiding?"

"Look at us!" Paul demanded. "We're letting it all hang out. To do this right, you're going to need to let loose too. From the fight you're putting up, what you're hiding must be something really horrible."

"I can't..." Milo began to explain.

"Bullshit! I'm here, all horns and hooves, taking the chance that you guys are going to turn against me just because my people really suck at PR." Paul shouted.

"The magic will not flow as it should if you are hiding yourself in a mundane human form. You *must* have the will for it to be so." Reaper said frankly.

"Fine! I'll do it!" Milo announced.

After a long silent moment, Paul finally asked, "Well?"

"Well what?" Milo asked obliviously.

"If your 'full-power' form is *that* horrible, go ahead and let 'er rip so everyone has a chance to get used to it before all of us need to be concentrating on other things."

Milo looked around the Vinculum Chamber at everyone waiting expectantly.

"I can't do it with everyone watching." Milo muttered uncomfortably.

Paul rolled his eyes and shook his head with exasperation.

"Does this mean that you have another form that I haven't seen before?" Archdruid Highley asked into the silence that followed.

"Even though you've always known that I'm not completely human, you've never seen me as anything else. For most of my life I've looked up to you like a big brother. How you see me *really* matters to me." Milo quietly explained.

"People's opinions of each other change all the time, every day. We're in a constant state of getting to know each other. That's what keeps things interesting." Archdruid Highley explained.

"Go ahead. We're not going to judge you." Paul gently encouraged.

"I can't make myself do it." Milo quietly admitted.

"Is there a difficult spell that you can do right now? Usually when I'm doing a really tough spell, it's all I can do *not* to change." Paul said frankly.

"Yeah. But I don't want for you to think..." Milo trailed off as he looked around at the people filling the room.

"You're going to have to do something really 'out there' to even raise an eyebrow with this bunch." Paul said matter-of-factly.

"Such a statement could be looked upon as a challenge. I would not wish for Friend-Milo to be goaded into behaviour that is not in his best interest." Reaper warned.

"No. He's right. I need to show you my secret self and this is the only way to do it right now." Milo regretfully explained.

"Then do it." Paul challenged.

"I can't do it here." Milo said simply.

"Where *can* you do it?" Paul hesitantly asked.

"I have to be outside the barriers, fully in the real world."

"Like in Waxell?" Paul asked to confirm.

"Yes. I could do it there."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"Jarvis? Would you open the door for us?" Milo asked reluctantly.

"Yes, of course." Archdruid Highley said before launching into his recitation of the familiar words.

"Jarvis, you can go with them if you want. We'll stay here in case anyone else needs a door opened." Agent Roberts volunteered, revealing that he had been paying attention to their conversation.

"Agent Roberts, would it be possible for your shadow to come with us? I'd kind of like to have his support for what I'm about to do." Milo asked cautiously.

"I guess so. I'm sure that he'll be happy to help you. Just make sure to give him back when you're done with him." Agent Roberts said firmly.

Milo made a quick series of gestures while muttering a chant.

Within a matter of seconds, Agent Roberts' shadow was standing beside him, looking fully three dimensional.

"Go only where you're invited. Take only what you're freely offered. Come back to me once you've had your fun." Agent Roberts said firmly.

The shadow engulfed Agent Roberts in his insubstantial arms and gave what could only be described as a joyful and enthusiastic hug.

After a moment of hugging, Agent Roberts quietly told his shadow, "Go on. I'll be right here when you get back."

"You can go with us if you like." Milo cautiously offered.

"No. It's best if I stay in the vinculum chamber to watch after the doorways. When one opens, the others close." Agent Roberts said frankly, then added, "Besides, Conrad and I need to compare notes on a few things while we've got the chance."

"This shouldn't take too long." Milo said before leading the way through the Waxell archway.

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"Did you need something?" Kirwin asked as he ran up to Milo as he exited the gazebo.

"One thing. I need for you to take hold of my hand for a minute." Milo said as he motioned toward the archway behind him for whoever was following to stay back.

As Kirwin slowed his approach, Milo offered his hand to the young teenager.

"Is this what you wanted?" Kirwin asked hesitantly as he placed his hand in Milo's.

"I just want to make sure that you're not afraid. You might see a few things that will frighten you in the next few minutes, but none of them will hurt you. I promise." Milo said firmly.

Before Kirwin could ask what was happening, he saw a humanoid shadow approaching them from the archway.

"This is a shadow being. And although he's quite powerful, he won't hurt you. He's actually a friend of mine." Milo quietly explained.

"What's his name?" Kirwin asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I don't think I ever thought to ask him." Milo said as he looked at the shadow curiously.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Kirwin." The teenager said softly to the shadow creature, obviously taking Milo's assurance to heart.

"What was that?" Milo asked as he looked at the shadow uncertainly.

"What was what?" Kirwin asked confusedly.

"I think he's trying to introduce himself to you." Milo said with the beginning of a smile.

After a long moment of listening, Kirwin quietly said, "I can't hear what he's saying."

"Be thankful for that. The *gift* of being able to hear shadows is more of a curse." Milo said seriously, then added more gently, "He says that his name is Obby and that he's pleased to meet you, Kirwin."

"Yeah. It's nice to meet you too." Kirwin said to Obby enthusiastically.

Milo motioned with his free hand toward the gazebo for the people waiting there to come out.

"Even though you've already met these guys, they look a little different than they did at the picnic. Please don't be afraid. They're no more dangerous now than they were before." Milo said in a low, even voice.

Kirwin reluctantly turned his attention away from Obby and froze in amazement at the demon and giant animated corpse emerging from the gazebo.

"Kirwin, in case you didn't get introduced before, this is Paul and Reaper." Milo said as he indicated each in turn with his free hand.

"I remember seeing you both when you were here before. Is *that* what you really look like or is *this*?" Kirwin asked curiously.

"This is Reaper's true form, the other is an illusion. This is what I look like when I do magic, but my 'human' form is what I look like when I wake up each morning." Paul helpfully explained.

"Do you mind if I watch?" A comparatively plain looking man asked as he stepped out of the gazebo.

"That'll be fine." Milo quietly responded.

"Kirwin, this is my dad. His name is D." Paul said proudly.

"It's nice to meet you." Kirwin said with a shy smile at him.

"So Milo, can you do it here or do we need to go nearer to the house?" Archdruid Highley asked seriously as he approached.

"Oh, um, yeah. I can do it here just fine." Milo said distractedly as he looked around.

"We're ready when you are." Paul encouraged.

"Kirwin, how are you doing? Are you alright with everything so far?" Milo asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I was only scared for a second. What are we doing?" Kirwin asked excitedly.

"You know that we have powers, right?" Milo asked gently.

"Yeah. I wish I had powers too." Kirwin said honestly.

"Watch out what you wish for." Milo cautioned him, then continued, "One of my powers is called shadowmancy. I'm about to do a very powerful spell. Whatever happens, I don't want you to be afraid. I won't let anything hurt you. Okay?"

"Even if I get scared, I'm not afraid of you. I'm here to help you and I know that you wouldn't hurt me." Kirwin said seriously.

"Good. That's exactly right. Even though some scary things may happen, you won't be in any danger. As long as you know that, it'll be alright." Milo assured him.

"What are you going to do?" Paul asked curiously, sounding to be slightly concerned.

Milo gave Kirwin's hand a final reassuring squeeze before letting it go.

After taking a few steps away from the gazebo, toward the house, Milo raised his arms toward the sky and began to quietly chant.

"Whoah." Paul gasped and seemed to be a bit unsteady on his hooves for a moment.

"What is it?" Kirwin asked curiously.

"I don't know what Milo's doing, but he's whipping up some major magics." Paul said quietly.

"It is curious. Among the children of angels, at the height of their battles, there is not this level of power." Reaper said slowly.

"Precise control." D said under his breath.

"What was that?" Archdruid Highley asked curiously.

"The beacon, the summons... whatever it is that he's calling, he's not wasting any magic on it. He's channeling every last bit of it into his spell. In all my years I've never met *anyone* who achieved this level of proficiency with shadowmancy." D said as he carefully watched and evaluated Milo's every move.

"From everything I know, he's never had any formal training." Archdruid Highley said honestly.

"How can that be..." D began to say when he noticed the beginning of Milo's physical transformation.

The air suddenly became still and silent.

The tumultuous clouds overhead appeared to have stopped their roiling just to see what Milo had metamorphosed into.

"What *are* you?" Archdruid Highley whispered as he looked at Milo in astonishment.

"This is the purest expression of who and what I am." Milo responded in a crisp, clear voice that was gentle to the ears.

"As far as I know, there haven't been any elves in this realm for over a hundred years." D said slowly.

"My father, when he was young, would sneak into this realm. He said that back then he was thirsty for adventure. He couldn't help himself." The being that Milo had become said with a tranquil smile.

"I guess that there are some things that are universal, regardless of species." D said with an affectionate glance at Paul.

"When he met my mother... well, you can guess what happened. Unfortunately, faeries can't exist in this realm for any length of time."

"But if your father could come here before, he can visit now, can't he?" D asked curiously.

"Yes. He keeps in touch and stops in to visit every now and then."

"If your father is powerful enough to breach our dimension, then he must at least be a baron." D said speculatively.

"He's mentioned that his equivalent title in our world would be 'Archduke' but I'm not sure how accurate that is. Our societies are so different, I don't know if it's possible to make direct comparisons."

"What's that?" Paul asked as he pointed to a dark patch in the distant sky that seemed to be getting larger.

"That's what I summoned." Milo said simply.

Paul looked at him and was once again surprised by his drastically different appearance. The mousey plain looking young man had been replaced with an exotically handsome man with longish straight blue-black hair, piercing blue eyes and distinctively elven ears.

"It looks like they're wearing cloaks but I can't see who they are." Archdruid Highley said as he struggled to get a good look at what was approaching.

"I summoned my 'sculptures' from the church." Milo said frankly.

"How could you... I thought those were tributes that you made to remember special members of the congregation who had passed." Archdruid Highley said cautiously.

"They were... in a way." Milo slowly answered, then held one hand out as one of the shrouded figures approached.

"This is Mrs. Cadameyer, or at least, it's her shadow." Milo carefully explained.

"You captured her soul?" Archdruid Highley asked in horror.

"No. Not really. I just liberated her shadow so that it could continue on for a bit longer and possibly bring closure to a few unresolved things for her." Milo said slowly.

"So when someone feels like it's too soon to go and that they're not ready, you give them a little more time to work things out?" D asked cautiously.

"Yes. Something like that. If their shadow can resolve things for them, it can bring peace and resolution to the soul in the 'after' when they're reunited."

"Why are they here?" Archdruid Highley asked as he looked at over a dozen shrouded figures surrounding them.

"When I separated them from their host bodies, they connected to me. Because of that, If I use any high level magic, they're going to

sense it. If I don't prepare them, they might have misunderstood what was happening and attacked you, believing that they're defending me." Milo said seriously.

"Is that why you have Obby here?" Kirwin asked curiously.

"Sort of." Milo said with a smile at him, then explained, "The enchantment that created Obby isn't the same as that of my 'choir', but I wanted him to know what was going on in case he sensed my use of magic. In some sense of the word, they're 'related' through their relationship to me."

"Now that they're here, what are you going to do with them?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I thought that I'd take them through the Vinculum Chamber to the Southseid barrier, where I'll be working. If I need anything while I'm in the middle of spellcasting, I can ask one of them to get it for me." Milo said simply.

"You know, that's actually not a bad idea. Do you think it would cause any trouble if I summoned a couple demons to help me when I get to Brynnhollow?" Paul asked curiously.

"Although I would be the last to encourage the summoning of demons, I can see the potential usefulness of having extra hands that you can call upon. Should I have need, I may likewise petition the celestial realm to allow some of the lesser cherubim to attend me until the barriers have been remade." Reaper said thoughtfully.

"Can you really do that?" Paul asked curiously.

"Should I call upon my father, I believe he might grant my request." Reaper said slowly.

"So is that it? I mean, is that all you needed to do out here, in the real world?" Archdruid Highley absently asked as he continued to stare in wonder at the shrouded figures surrounding them.

"Yes. I just didn't want to take the chance of summoning them from inside one... or all of the barriers. I'm not sure what would have

happened, but they might have hurt someone, or themselves in their attempt to get to me." Milo quietly explained.

"I don't know why you were worried about showing me your true self. You look amazing." Archdruid Highley finished with a smile.

"That's why." Milo said regretfully, then explained, "The other me, the one you're used to seeing, *that's* the real me. That's who I am. This is faerie magic. If you expect me to be 'this' you'll be disappointed."

"Can you be 'this' for as long as it takes to get the job done?" Paul asked intently.

"Yeah. The other me, that's who I am. This is what I'm capable of." Milo said firmly.

"That's good enough for me." Paul said simply, then looked to Archdruid Highley and said, "He already told you that he doesn't want to disappoint you. Don't screw this up."

"I'll do my best." Archdruid Highley said weakly.

"Milo. I'm not old enough to be a big brother to you, but I think that I can be a little brother if you need me to be. If Jarvis ends up being a dick, come and talk to me. Between us, I bet we'll be able to sort things out." Paul said confidently.

"I'm not going to screw it up." Archdruid Highley immediately defended.

"Not intentionally." Paul easily agreed, then turned to Milo and whispered, "Get with me if he pisses you off."

Milo smiled gratefully and nodded his acceptance of Paul's offer.

"I'm opening the doorway. Anyone who wants to can follow me." Archdruid Highley said as he walked back toward the gazebo.

"Will you be alright out here?" Milo asked Kirwin, who had been watching the whole thing.

"You're really amazing." Kirwin said with a smile.

"I think you're amazing too." Milo said warmly, then asked, "Are you and your grandfather going to be alright out here?"

"Yeah. We'll be fine. And if we get too tired or anything, we can always go in the house. That's where grandpa is right now. I told him I'd watch out while he took a nap."

"That's really good of you, Kirwin." Milo said with a smile, then added, "I've got work to do, but I'll stop back out here later and see how you're doing."

"Okay. But remember to let me know if you need anything. I'll be here waiting for you." Kirwin reminded him.

"If one of these shrouded figures comes for you, follow it. It will mean that I need your help but that I can't get away to ask for it. Will you do that?"

"Yeah! I'll keep a lookout for it." Kirwin said excitedly.

"Good. I'll see you later then." Milo said as he turned and walked through the archway into the gazebo.

Following Milo were nearly twenty vague shrouded shadow figures.

The one shadow figure that wasn't draped in a shroud walked up to Kirwin and offered his semi-transparent hand.

"It was nice to meet you Obby. Just like Milo, if you ever need my help, just come and get me." Kirwin said as he shook the dark hand.

When the handshake was over, Obby didn't let go. Instead, he pulled Kirwin's hand to his chest and wrapped his other arm around the boy.

Kirwin was surprised by the action, but didn't object as the shadow figure gave him a firm hug full of tenderness and caring.

"You know how Milo told you to watch out what you wish for?" Paul asked as he approached.

"Yeah." Kirwin answered as Obby released him from the hug.

"Don't listen to him. Dream big. You don't fail when your dream doesn't come true, you fail when you stop dreaming." Paul said seriously as he watched Obby walk through the archway.

"Such decadent ideas. I would expect no less from a devil." Reaper said haughtily.

"Are you saying that you think I'm wrong?" Paul asked his companion curiously.

"No. Only that the concept is decadent." Reaper said as a grin crossed his corpse-like face.

"I can live with that." Paul said with a wink in Kirwin's direction before leading the way through the archway, into the gazebo.

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"Do I even want to know?" Agent Roberts asked as he stared at the ghostly shadow figures crowding into the Vinculum Chamber.

"If you'll open the doorway to Nevermore, you won't have to worry about it." Milo responded.

Without prelude, Agent Roberts began to recite the short version of the 'password'.

"I'll get rid of this table to give us more room." Paul said into the chaos.

In the next few minutes, no one spoke as Milo led the procession through the archway.

When Milo returned a moment later, he quietly asked, "What now?"

"What happened to you?" Miss Oaken asked in amazement at his drastic transformation.

"Paul gets horns. I get this." Milo said uncomfortably.

"Looks like you won *that* lottery." Corabeth said with an admiring smile.

"What do we still need to get together before we can start the spellcasting?" Paul asked, trying to steer the conversation in the most productive direction.

"We should have most, if not all, of what we need. Let's gather everyone who will be directly participating and take stock. To start with, the relic holders need to gather each behind their Magi." Professor Everstone instructed.

"The spellcasters should probably do that too." D interjected, loudly enough for all the other spellcasters to hear.

"Did you leave Rhuru-wra in Brynnhollow?" Agent Fastbeck asked Agent Roberts seriously.

"Yeah. I'll go get him and Ares and be right back."

"I'll go get Den and Otis. Where are you going to want them?" Agent Fastbeck asked, directing his last question primarily toward Professor Everstone.

"At present I'm assuming that the Archdruid's brother will be placed by the Nevermore doorway. As for the other young man... if I'm understanding his situation correctly, he will be stationed at the Waxell door, possibly alone." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"But since just about everything we plan gets turned on its head anyway, we might as well just refer to it as our 'starting placement'." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"Yes. That might be best." Professor Everstone slowly agreed.

"Where will the ceremony be conducted?" Paul asked as he looked around the room at all the people present.

"In some sense, the ceremony has already begun. But as far as the contribution of the Magi, I believe that each of you are going to

conduct your part of the spell in front of the doorway that aligns with your nature." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"So everyone doing the Brynnhollow barrier spell should probably go with me." Paul said uncertainly.

"We're here. Where do you need us?" Ares asked as he and Dark preceded Rhuru-wra and Agent Roberts into the Vinculum Chamber.

At the same time, Agent Fastbeck ushered Den, Otis and Linnaeus in through the Nevermore archway.

"Otis, would you stand over there by the Waxell doorway?" Professor Everstone asked professionally as he pointed.

"Sure." Otis answered as he broke away from his companions.

"Everyone else, group in front of the door to the barrier you will be recasting." Professor Everstone said more loudly to assure that everyone heard him.

"Do you have anyone else casting with us?" Mr. Hansen asked anxiously.

"Not as yet. Hopefully you and Mr. Couleigh will be up to the task, but I will be on the lookout for additional help for you as we proceed." Professor Everstone promised.

"That would be appreciated. Once I've unfolded space, there's not much more that I can do until I've had a chance to recover."

"When D asked me about doing this, I didn't have any idea that I might be casting a barrier spell all on my own."

"You won't be alone. I don't know how much help I'll be, but I promise that I'll be there with you every step of the way." Mr. Hansen assured him.

"I appreciate that." Mr. Couleigh said sincerely.

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"Relic holders? Are you clear on what you're going to be doing?" Professor Everstone asked as he looked at each of them in turn.

"We're just pulling up elemental magic through the relics and feeding it to the Magi, right?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Yes. Boiled down to its most basic elements, that is *exactly* what you will be doing." Professor Everstone confirmed.

"Then you don't have to worry about us. We got this." Zanner said confidently.

Dex was standing at his side and seemed to be every bit as confident.

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"Den and Linnaeus, would you move over by the doorway?"

"We can try. Linnaeus is kind of big. Is there any way that we're going to be able to do our part outside?" Den asked hopefully.

"Yes. When the time comes, I think all the bridges are going to need to be in their own realm to properly relay the magic." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

Rhuru-wra let out a low growl in response.

"You said it!" Ares said with a grin at him as they each moved to stand before their own doorways.

"What else do we need?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously as he looked at the three separate groups of people, perched in readiness.

"I'm not sure..." Professor Everstone began to say when Reaper interrupted.

"According to the arcane knowledge, each of the gatekeepers should proceed to the door of the realm they have been entrusted to defend and place their hand upon the doorway." Reaper said slowly.

Agent Roberts, Agent Fastbeck and Archdruid Highley each walked to their respective doorways and did as they were instructed.

"Now what?" Agent Roberts prompted.

"I... do not know. The knowledge fails me." Reaper said in a bewildered voice.

Otis looked to the other three archways, then to the one he was standing in front of all by himself.

"Paul, do you have insights into the matter?" Reaper asked hopefully.

"Only that we have everything that we need." Paul said in a lost tone as he looked around uncertainly.

On impulse, Otis reached out to touch the invisible doorway beside him.

He turned back at the sudden silence to discover that he was standing alone in the weather worn gazebo, able to see through all the archways into the backyard of the Old Tennyson Place.

Chapter 46

"What happened to everyone?" Archdruid Highley asked as he looked around in panic.

"They are, no doubt, exactly where they were a moment ago." Reaper said slowly.

"The better question might be, what happened to *us*?" Den asked rhetorically.

"Okay. What happened to us?" Dex asked into the silence that followed.

"Look at where we are. What can you tell me about this room?" Mr. Hansen asked slowly.

"It's the same..." Zanner began to say, then really looked at the room they were in.

"We're in the Vinculum Chamber in the Protectorate, aren't we?" Dex asked cautiously.

"That's right. This is the Roman style ruin, not the gazebo that we were in before." Mr. Hansen confirmed.

"Which is also evident from the landscape that we can see through *all* the archways." Mr. Couleigh observed. As the others looked out, they noticed the arid 'too bright' scenery indicative of the protectorate.

The wheezing growl from Linnaeus drew everyone's attention.

"Do you think we *need* help?" Den asked in response.

"Who? What kind of help? What are you talking about?" Zanner asked in confusion.

"My demi-brother suggested that I might call upon the aid of my father in this endeavor." Reaper explained.

"Your dad's an angel, right?" Dex slowly asked.

"Yes. That is correct."

"Do you think that calling him would help us... I mean, like... at all?" Zanner asked haltingly.

"Truthfully, no." Reaper regretfully informed them, then explained, "My father has many virtues and is quite powerful, but he can also be somewhat... controlling. Were he here, he would no doubt attempt to resolve the entire situation himself, thus destroying all that we have achieved."

"Um, yeah. Let's not do that." Zanner said uncomfortably.

"With the Vinculum not allowing us to travel to the other barriers, do we have any way of communicating with the other spellcasting groups?" Mr. Couleigh asked Mr. Hansen quietly.

"No. None that I can think of." Mr. Hansen confirmed.

"Then does that mean that everything that we've done so far is lost?" Zanner asked uncertainly.

"Quite the opposite." Reaper immediately answered.

"I don't see how that can be. Without communication with the others, there's no practical way for us to coordinate our efforts to release the stored magic or recreate the barriers." Mr. Hansen said reasonably.

"We can't be sure that the others are even alive. We're just assuming that they are." Mr. Couleigh said seriously.

"Considering that before the separation we had gathered everything and everyone that would be needed, it seems that our best course of action might be to proceed under the assumption that the others are in place and also proceeding as though nothing had changed." Mr. Hansen said reasonably.

"How long do we do that? I mean, if they're all dead... how long do we wait for them? How long are we going to stay here and

pretend?" Zanner asked anxiously and appeared to be fighting for emotional control.

"I could hike to the edge of the barrier and ask Jengelica to drive to Brynnhollow... that could take a few hours." Archdruid Highley finished unenthusiastically.

"No. The others are depending on us to do our part. We do not want to lose this chance." Reaper said decisively.

Linnaeus let out a sudden barking growl that seemed rather urgent.

Archdruid Highley, Den and Reaper obviously understood whatever Linnaeus had said and were considering it carefully.

Zanner, Dex, Mr. Hansen and Mr. Couleigh just as obviously did *not* understand and looked at each other stupidly, waiting for someone to tell them what was going on.

"Father, hear my prayer." Reaper said as he turned his face upward and fanned out his multiple arms, almost like wings.

"Should it please you to do so, would you aid me, your beloved child of flesh, to reinforce the sanctuary you created for us?" Reaper slowly implored.

Unwillingly, Zanner and Dex followed Reaper's hopeful gaze toward the ceiling, although they intellectually knew that they weren't going to see anything there.

"Father, I seek only the aid of a few of the less powerful celestial beings to do those things that the limits of my earthly flesh prevent me from doing for myself." Reaper said hopefully.

"I thank you for your attention, Father. You have my love and admiration always." Reaper finished as he closed his eyes and bowed his head reverently.

"Wow. I never even *thought* of talking to my dad like *that*." Zanner said frankly.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure that he doesn't expect you to." Mr. Couleigh said with a grin.

"You're Nazzy's dad, aren't you?" Dex asked curiously.

"Yes. That's right. Nazareth is my son. We met at the picnic by the lake at D's house." Mr. Couleigh said with such pride that nothing else needed to be said on the subject.

"What did you just do? What's going to happen?" Mr. Hansen asked Reaper cautiously.

"I have no ability to predict the future, so I can only speculate on that. But in regard to what I just did, I called for help to do things that I am unable to do with the personnel and supplies at hand." Reaper said carefully.

"He doesn't know." Den said simply, then explained, "He said all that stuff without really saying anything. So either he doesn't know or he won't tell us. Since there's no real reason for him not to tell us, I'm guessing that he just doesn't have a clue."

"There are many possibilities. I just have no way of knowing which, if any, my Father will choose." Reaper tried to explain.

"No clue." Den summarized with a grin.

Zanner and Dex shared a smile with him.

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"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!" Zanner screamed as he skittered back, further into the stone structure, to be nearer his teammates.

"Just stand back. It doesn't look like it's trying to attack us." Mr. Hansen said cautiously.

Mr. Couleigh reached around Mr. Hansen and grabbed both Zanner and Dex and pulled them to stand behind him.

As Mr. Hansen started weaving the signs of a rather complicated defensive spell, Reaper said, "These appear to be help from my father."

Everyone froze in place as they watched a second bizarre creature slowly walk into the room.

"What are they?" Mr. Couleigh asked hesitantly, still shielding the boys with his own body.

"Cherubim." Reaper said simply.

Zanner and Dex finally emerged from behind Mr. Couleigh to get a better look at what the creatures were.

In the simplest terms, they had the bodies of large birds, six wings and the faces of children. In short, they were horrific.

As the first one came to a standing position, its lower wings crossed to cover its legs. The middle set of wings were spread behind it while the upper set of wings crossed to mostly cover its face.

The voice of the thing when it spoke was like a combination of nails down a chalkboard and bubbling stew.

"In the company of humans I speak their common language, as is courtesy." Reaper carefully instructed.

"Child of Sword. Your father sends greetings and salutations. I am Zarall, my other is Jael. We are at your service." The cherub said in a voice that was not entirely human-like, but nowhere near as grating and uncomfortable as its natural voice. It could almost be considered 'child-like'.

"This barrier we are in is joined with two others, forming a triangle. I need to know that the people at the center of the other two barriers have survived and that they are working toward our common goal."

Zarall closed its eyes for a moment, then quietly said, "There is trace to follow if we go now."

"Go then. We will be working under the assumption that the other two groups are doing the same." Reaper said firmly.

The two celestial beings crouched into what was obviously a more comfortable posture for them, then hurried out of the room.

"Dex and Zanner, are you ready for this?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"We're fine, but what about you? Do you think you're going to be able to unfold space *then* remake the barrier?" Zanner asked anxiously.

"After seeing the lengths that everyone's going to... I'm confident that we'll find a way."

Zanner smiled at Mr. Hansen's decision, then said, "Okay. Let's do this."

* * * * *

"What just happened?" Milo asked as he looked around anxiously.

Rhuru-wra let loose a pitious growl that left no doubt that he was **not** pleased with whatever was going on around them.

"It appears that when the proper groups were gathered, all within the vinculum chamber, that the chamber separated into its component pieces. The room that existed several places at once is now separate rooms." Professor Everstone said speculatively.

"What is this place?" Dr. Williams asked as he looked out the archways at the lush thick foliage.

"It appears that we're within the Southseid barrier." Professor Everstone answered slowly, then added, "For us to complete the job that we came here to do, this is the group that we need to be with and this is where we need to be."

"Do you think that Paul's okay?" Filipe interjected anxiously.

"I'm sure that he's fine. He's probably at the Brynnhollow version of the vinculum chamber." Agent Fastbeck quietly assured the young teenager.

"Yes. And I have no doubt that right this minute, he's deducing that we need to proceed with our original plans." Professor Everstone added confidently.

Rhuru-wra bleated a whine that drew everyone's attention.

Milo considered for a moment, then told him, "It won't hurt to have them here. Go ahead and gather anyone you want to support you and have them standing by. If G is up to it, I'd like to go ahead and get started as soon as possible."

Without further adieu, Rhuru-wra dashed out through the 'stonehenge' archway and into the thick, humid forest.

"I'll try, but I don't know how much good I'll be if I'm trying to concentrate on doing magic while I'm worried about Paul and my dad." G said honestly.

"I'm not clear on where Brynnhollow is located. But if you can give me an idea of where we are in relation to where *they* are, I can try sending a couple of my shadows to check on them." Milo said quietly.

Before G could answer, a shadow seemed to separate itself from the wall and become its own independent being.

"I'm sorry Obby, but there's no way that you can go out to find him on your own. You would only be able to travel about as fast as a normal human and it wouldn't be safe for you. Stay here with me and I'll keep you safe until we're back with Agent Roberts." Milo finished gently.

Obby looked around at the others who were staring at him, then walked to stand before Milo, where he was promptly gathered into Milo's arms.

"He's fine. I promise. You'll be back with him before you know it." Milo crooned as he held the shadow in his arms as though it were something precious.

"Um..." G awkwardly interrupted, "What?"

"This is Agent Roberts' shadow. His name is Obby. Please try to be kind to him, he's in a fragile state at the moment." Milo implored him to understand.

"Um, yeah. Just let me know if there's anything I can do." G said uncertainly.

Rather than answer verbally, Milo, still in his Elven form, made a graceful series of hand gestures, obviously casting a spell.

A moment later, two shrouded figures crossed through the archway and stopped before him, hovering slightly above the floor.

"Who can tell me where we are in relation to the other colonies?" Milo asked seriously.

"I can help you with that." Agent Fastbeck said immediately as he stepped forward.

"If you can give me an idea what direction and how far, I can give my shadows enough to go on to start searching." Milo said frankly.

"I don't really have a sense of where North is, so I don't know about directionality, but I can give you a decent idea of distance."

"I can conjure a compass." Dr. Williams volunteered.

"Then that should be all that we'll need." Milo said with a slight smile.

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Given the information that Agent Fastbeck had been able to provide, Milo ended up sending shadows to both the Nevermore and Brynnhollow barriers. He explained that he wouldn't be able to send more than the most rudimentary messages, but he would be

able to determine without question if the other two groups were doing well.

"While we're waiting for the shadows to return and give us their report, the best thing that we can do is begin the Assembly of the Magi to release the stored magic." Professor Everstone said seriously.

"The Assembly of the Magi started the moment the three of us met. Everything that's happened since then has been to bring us to where we are right now." Milo said with certainty, then he turned to G and asked, "Are you ready to begin?"

Rather than give a verbal answer, G held out the baton that he had been mindlessly carrying for most of the past few days and called upon it to extend itself into its true form.

With no outward triggering movement, the spear came into being.

"I'm not exactly sure what you need for me to do, but I'm ready to do it." G said simply.

"Empower me." Milo said simply, then explained, "I will take your magical power and guide it to release the great lake of magic stored within the vinculum."

"We could have done that anytime." G said cautiously, sure that he was missing something.

"No. It's not going to work until all three of us, the Magi, are performing their spells at the same time. Right now, the most I can do is perform my part of the spell and wait for the other two to do theirs." Milo explained.

"And I'm going to have to keep the spear's magic flowing until everyone else has their spells done?" G asked to verify his understanding.

"Yes. You'll need to keep up the magical flow until the barrier has been dismantled and recast. Once that's done, I will sever the flow of the stored magic from the vinculum. Only then will you be able

to stem the magical flow from the spear. Do you think that you're up to it?"

"Now you ask..." G muttered under his breath.

"Once we start, we're committed to it. The only way to back out is for everyone, everywhere, to stop their spells." Professor Everstone explained.

"How long is this going to take?" G asked anxiously.

"Hours, maybe. Although it could conceivably stretch on for days." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"I *can't* cast a spell for *days*!" G protested.

"You misunderstand. You won't get a choice. If you begin this, you will not be able to withdraw. Even if something goes horribly wrong with the spell, there is no failsafe, there's no escape clause built into it. At the end, there is a remote possibility that there will only be a withered husk left occupying the space where you once were." Professor Everstone said gravely.

"You've got some kind of sales pitch there." G said snarkily, obviously trying to hide his nervousness with humor.

"G... Gwayne, the chances of that happening are remote, but there *is* a chance. I believe that you have the level of power and the skill to do this successfully. If we give up this chance to help the Wudewas, there likely won't be another." Professor Everstone said seriously, then finished by saying, "The choice is yours."

"No pressure." G said somewhat hysterically as he looked around the gathering.

"G, if you can't do it, I can try. You don't *have to*." Filipe said as he stood confidently at Dr. Williams' side.

G smiled at Filipe despite himself, then quietly said, "I think these guys are going to need your help doing the spellcasting. Don't worry about me. I got this."

"Are you sure?" Agent Fastbeck asked quietly.

"Yeah. I wasn't really thinking about backing out. I guess I just wanted to get a sense of how dangerous it really was. Besides, what kind of a brother would I be if I didn't do my part to give Paul everything that he needs to show off and be amazing?" G finished with his trademark cocky grin.

"So what do we still need to do?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he looked around.

"At this point in time, we need for G to use the Mikael Spear to direct a pure elemental magical flow to Milo." Professor Everstone said slowly.

"And the rest of us will need to be prepared. Just as soon as Milo is able to release the stored magic of the Southseid barrier, we will need to direct it to Rhuru-wra and his people."

"I'll go let Rhuru-wra know that we're about to start." Agent Fastbeck said as he took a step toward the archway.

Obby quickly moved to Agent Fastbeck's side and put a hand on his arm to hold him back.

"What?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he looked down at the transparent hand.

"What are you doing, Obby?" Milo asked cautiously.

After a moment of listening, Milo smiled and said, "He knows that you're Agent Roberts' coworker and friend. He wants to help you if he can."

"Never let it be said that I turned down help when it was offered." Agent Fastbeck said with a smile at the shadow at his side.

Obby released Agent Fastbeck's arm and followed along as he stepped through the archway.

"You ready?" G asked as he hefted the spear.

"Would you like to wait for the report from my shadows before you start?" Milo asked cautiously.

"Nah. If I know Paul, he's probably already got the magic up and running and is just waiting on everyone else to catch up to him." G said with an amused smile.

"You make having a brother sound like an incredible experience." Milo said gently.

"Depends on the brother." G said simply, then held the spear forward.

Milo took in a deep breath to help him clear his mind.

As he did, he noticed G's skin becoming 'painted' and the most serious and determined clown expression he had ever seen come into being on G's face.

* * * * *

"What... the... *fuck* just happened?" Paul asked in bewilderment as he looked at the small group gathered around him.

"Paul..." D said in a warning tone.

Paul looked at D challengingly, almost daring his father to chastise him.

After a moment to consider, D finally said, "Never mind. Besides, criticizing a demon for swearing *does* seem kind of pointless."

"Where did everyone else go?" Corabeth timidly asked.

"I'm guessing that everyone went to where they're needed to cast their part of the spell." D said speculatively.

"Yeah. It was like when we got the last puzzle piece in its right place, everything all of a sudden just activated or something." Paul reasoned.

"We sort of came to the conclusion that we were already part of the spell ritual, even when we were setting up for it." Ares interjected seriously, conspicuous in his Karasu Tengu form.

"I got that feeling too. But I never expected for something like this to happen." Agent Roberts said honestly as he looked around with concern.

"I know that you guys are busy figuring this out, but would you mind if Dark and I left for a minute to be sure that our family is okay?" Ares asked anxiously.

"Yes. Of course. But we're going to need you back here soon so that we can start recasting the barrier." D easily responded.

"They should be within a few minute's walk from here. I just have to see for myself that they're alright before I can focus on anything else." Ares said as he looked anxiously through the Brynnhollow archway that he had entered through.

"Go." Paul said firmly.

D looked at his son, somewhat surprised at his audacity, but didn't countermand him.

After a moment to be sure that no one was going to object, Ares and Dark turned as one and hurried away. As soon as they were through the archway, they changed fully into their animal forms and continued on at their best possible speed, flying and slithering away, respectively.

"Do you think G is at the Southseid barrier?" Paul asked his father anxiously.

"I think that he's probably in that barrier's version of the Vinculum chamber. Given who we have with us, it seems reasonable to assume that they're in a nearly identical situation." D said assuringly.

"Okay. I can understand why you'd think that, but I can't just stand back and trust that everything will eventually work out. I need to

prove to myself that G and the others are okay." Paul said as he made a vague motion toward the ground in front of him.

Just as he did, a blur of darkness deposited two furry little bundles at his feet.

"Something happened to separate us and I need to be sure that G is okay. I want you two to find G and see how he's doing. Help him if he needs it, then I'd like for Mah Zah to stay with G and for Ginh Zah to report back to me. Got it?"

A serious bark and meow were the immediate response.

"I left a trace portal at the Southseid base camp. That should save you some time. There shouldn't be any humans around, so you can go in your natural forms. That way you can bypass the Southseid barrier completely and go in from the air." Paul said seriously.

The puppy and kitten immediately transformed into red and black winged lizards.

"Mah Zah. You're still my familiar, that's not going to change. But I want for you to let G understand your language so that you can tell him that we're fine and find out if he needs anything."

A quick hiss was Mah Zah's immediate response.

Paul made a quick gesture and a complex spell diagram appeared on the floor.

"Go." Paul said simply.

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah immediately flew through the dark blur that had formed in the center of the spell diagram.

"Why did you leave a trace portal at the base camp?" Corabeth asked curiously.

"Just because it's so far away. It took so much time and work to get there, I thought that it might be good to have it in place sometime later."

"You turned out to be right about that." Corabeth said frankly.

"Actually, I was thinking that I could have it there in case I forgot my gloves at the base camp or something like that. I didn't have the first clue that I'd be using it for something like this." Paul admitted.

"However it worked out, it looks like it's going to save some time." D said honestly.

"Did you get a chance to call Nicholas and Amelia after I talked to you last night?"

"Yes. Both agreed, although Amelia told me to remind you that you can't talk directly to Nomia." D said seriously.

"That's not entirely true. Until Amelia enters into a contract and officially makes Nomia her familiar, she has no say in who Nomia bestows her gifts upon. She can talk to me if she decides that she wants to." Paul said firmly.

"You know, to those outside the wizardry discipline, you sound a little tyrannical." D cautiously informed him.

"That's part of what it means to be a summoner. You have to either dominate or submit. That doesn't *only* mean in your dealings with demons." Paul said seriously.

"Be that as it may, our primary concern now should have to do with completing our mission and remaking the Brynnhollow barrier."

"Once I get started spellcasting, I'm probably going to be immobilized for the duration. I refuse to be helpless." Paul stated firmly.

"I'm not asking you to be." D said simply.

Three spell diagrams appeared on the stone floor in front of Paul. People automatically backed away so as not to be caught in one of them.

Paul was undoubtedly pushing his limits as he seemed to have lost touch with the world around him and became consumed with casting the three complex summoning spells simultaneously .

No one spoke in deference to the great power and skill that were being displayed.

In his low demonic voice, Paul slowly began to incant, "In the land held by Circe, where the disgraced have been exiled, I call upon the Yan-gant-y-tan to bring one forth to do my bidding. I call upon Xaphan. Come without odor and be bound by my word. I hereby summon! I hereby command! Come forth!"

A gray blur appeared just above the spell diagram.

Paul watched intently as a mostly humanoid demonic being took shape from the gray blur that had appeared above the largest of the spell diagrams.

The demon had the classic horns and pointy ears that one might expect. It's furry body seemed to be somewhat misshapen, with the limbs appearing to be spindly in comparison to the barrel shaped torso. Also notable was the fact that the demon's hands and feet seemed to be disproportionately large.

"I'm going to summon Nomia and Frederick now. I can't communicate with either of them directly, so I'm going to ask you to translate for them. Ginh Zah will be back soon. She's going to be working with me, helping me with my spellcasting. I'm going to be counting on you three to watch after things while I'm busy with that."

Xaphan growled briefly and held Paul's gaze as he slowly raised one of his too-large hands.

Paul slightly smiled, then responded, "I'm not afraid of what you are. That's *why* I summoned you. Guard my back so that I won't have to keep track of what's going on while I'm focused on other things."

The tips of Xaphan's long spindly fingers ignited into five separate flames.

"Good. I'm going to be counting on you." Paul said In a deadly serious tone then turned his attention to the next smaller spell diagram.

A moment later, a demon imp appeared in the center of the diagram.

"Hello Frederick. I'm going to be needing your help today." Paul said with a smile.

It took a moment for Frederick to assess his situation, but as soon as he had determined where he was, he immediately launched himself at Paul's hoof and enthusiastically hugged his lower leg.

Paul laughed at the action, then reached down and plucked the demon imp from his leg to relocate him on his chest.

"Believe me, I'm as glad as you are that we're going to get to work together." Paul assured the imp as he gently petted him.

After a few seconds of that, he glanced toward the last spell diagram for a moment and watched as a blur in reality deposited a tiny nearly humanoid figure who appeared to be composed of leaves, twigs and general debris.

"How's my favorite Demon Sprite doing today?" Paul asked gently.

The little demon chittered an enthusiastic response.

There was a moment of silence, then Paul looked at Xaphan inquiringly.

Somewhat grudgingly, Xaphan growled, "Other say that you will to summon. Give warning."

Paul smiled, then said, "I should have known that Amelia would let you know what was going on. Anyway, all that I'm going to need for you to do is stay alert and watch after things while I'm tied up with some complicated spellcasting. Are you up to that?"

No translation was needed. Paul was easily able to deduce the answer from the enthusiastic and animated response.

Paul looked around the gathering and said, "For anyone who didn't catch it, I've just summoned some demon helpers who can help us out if anything comes up while we're spellcasting. I don't have any reason to believe that we're going to be attacked, but face it. If someone *were* planning to attack us, you couldn't ask for a better opportunity for them."

"I thought you were just being paranoid." D said with a tender smile at his son.

"Yeah. I'm paranoid the same way that you are when you prepare for contingencies before an important meeting." Paul said with a grin back at his father, not entirely dispelling the seriousness of his response.

"Paul. I'm worried about Dag. Do you happen to have another portal placed at the Protectorate?" Miss Oaken quietly asked.

"No. I was only there for our initial evaluation and never entered the *actual* Protectorate. From what I heard, with the blessing they bestowed on the land, it would probably be lethal for me or anyone demonic if we tried to go there." Paul said honestly.

"So there's no way you can get in touch with them to see if they're alright?" Miss Oaken asked to confirm.

"Not that I can think of. Even if I could target my Oculus Demonus in this dimension, it wouldn't matter because it won't work where there's holy ground." Paul said regretfully.

"If we're going to have any contact with them, it's probably going to have to come from *them* contacting *us*." D said frankly.

"You guys aren't waiting on us, are you?" Ares asked as he and Dark approached the archway, again conspicuous in their Karasa Tengu and Nāga forms.

"No. We were taking care of some other things. Is your family alright?" D asked cautiously.

"They're all fine. Although they could 'sense' when the vinculum chamber broke apart." Ares said frankly.

"Regardless of whether we *think* we're ready or not, we have everyone here that we're supposed to and time is ticking away from us. Does anyone have *any* reason that we *shouldn't* proceed?" D asked as he looked around the room.

"We don't have any way of coordinating with the other groups. Shouldn't we try to arrange something for that?" Mr. Bentley Brown asked seriously.

"And just what would you suggest?" D asked flatly, letting his disdain for the man be clearly heard by all.

"Actually, that's a good question." Paul quickly said in Mr. Bentley Brown's defense. "But if you think about it, even though the Magi are going to be releasing the magic all at once, each group is going to be casting the spell for their own barrier. I can't see any reason why you'd have to coordinate that."

"Even so, without a way to coordinate, the Magi won't be able to release their magic simultaneously." D said slowly.

"That's not really a big deal because we were never going to do that anyway. We're all part of the same cooperative spell, but it doesn't trigger until we've each accessed the power of the relics and done our own versions of the spell. When all three of us are ready, the release will happen, but until the third one of us completes his spell, the others will just have to wait and be ready." Paul explained with some difficulty.

"So what does that mean? What do you have to do right now?" Corabeth asked Paul curiously.

"I have to go ahead and start my casting of the spell to access the magic stored within the Brynnhollow portion of the vinculum. Once

I've done that, then I just have to wait until Milo and Reaper have released their magic. As soon as that's done, then everyone can get to work taking down and recasting the barriers." Paul said thoughtfully.

"It sounds to me like you have a better idea than anyone else of what needs to be done next." D said cautiously.

"I know about what the Magi have to do. Once the magic has been released, I'll have to regulate the flow. At that point I'm out of it. I'm just going to have to trust that you and Miss Oaken and Corabeth will take care of the rest. There won't be anything else that I'll be able to do for you at that point." Paul said frankly.

D looked at Miss Oaken and Corabeth before quietly saying, "We'll make it work."

Chapter 47

"How about you? Are you ready for this?" Zanner asked Reaper cautiously.

"I believe that I am as ready as one could be when preparing for an Assembly of the Magi." Reaper said frankly.

"I get that it's a big deal, but I'm probably better off not knowing just how big it really is." Zanner said frankly.

"Perhaps. Although I would recommend that you investigate the significance of the ceremony at a later date. I believe that knowing the scale of what you accomplished will be helpful in establishing your confidence in your future endeavors... assuming that we survive, of course." Reaper hesitantly finished.

"Yeah. I won't bother investigating it if we don't." Zanner said with a grin.

"How can you joke at a time like this?" Dex asked with exasperation.

"It's what I do." Zanner said simply, then thought to add, "If you ever see me not joking around, you should probably worry about me."

"We should begin. The others might have already started." Reaper said seriously.

"No. They haven't. If Paul were using elemental magic, I'd be able to feel it." Dex said with certainty.

"Didn't Paul say something about being able to sense you too?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Yes. We never really talked about it too much, but he mentioned that he could feel it when I joined with the earth." Dex quietly confirmed.

"Then maybe you could send him a message and let him know when you're ready." Zanner hesitantly suggested.

"Maybe. I can't do it right now though. Paul won't be able to sense me until he joins with the water. But just as soon as I sense him there, I can send him a pulse to let him know that I'm ready. I can't promise that he'll understand what it means, but this is Paul we're talking about. I'm not too worried about it."

"Am I to understand that you will know when Paul begins his casting of the spell?" Reaper asked cautiously.

"I'll know when he's joined with the water and is actively using magic. I won't have any way of knowing what he's using the magic for." Dex said carefully.

"What about Milo? Will you be able to sense when he joins with the air?"

"Maybe... I really can't be sure. Since Paul and I can sense each other, it's possible that we might be able to sense Milo too." Dex said slowly.

"What about when G accesses the air? Can you sense that?" Zanner asked curiously.

"I can sense when someone is active somewhere, but the only person I can identify is Paul." Dex carefully explained, doing his best to keep the explanation simple and brief.

"Then I guess we're just going to have to make the most out of that." Zanner muttered thoughtfully.

"Don't forget that everyone else isn't just sitting around waiting for us to fix everything. They're going to be doing stuff too. If we can figure out what they might do, there might be stuff that we can do to help them." Dex carefully reasoned.

"We also need to keep in mind that the Cherubim might somehow be able to help us." Zanner added.

"I can't see how." Dex said honestly.

"Are you ready to go?" Mr. Hansen asked with Mr. Couleigh at his side.

"Go where?" Zanner reluctantly asked.

"We have to hike to the edge of the barrier to go outside so that I can unfold space." Mr. Hansen said simply.

"Do you really have to be outside to do that?" Zanner asked reluctantly.

"While I suppose that it might be possible to set up or collapse a tent from the inside, I wouldn't advise it... and this is a lot more complex than a tent." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"The knowledge tells me that the oriad, the earth mage and I will need to remain. Go and perform your duties outside, then return. Linnaeus can request the aid of others to help transport you to the edge of the barrier most quickly." Reaper said seriously.

"Do I need to stay here or go?" Den asked uncertainly.

Before anyone else could answer, Linnaeus spoke out in his incomprehensible language.

"While there isn't a need for you to go, Linnaeus is needed and I get the sense that he would appreciate your company." Archdruid Highley interjected.

"Yes. It is important that you develop your teamwork and sense of unity." Reaper agreed.

"Let's head out. We can gather helpers and gain speed along the way." Mr. Hansen said decisively.

"How sure are you that you need for me to go along?" Mr. Couleigh cautiously asked.

"While building our rapport would be a worthy enough reason to include you, the fact of the matter is that I may need some assistance to safely unfold this pocket of space that we're in."

"You'll have it." Mr. Couleigh promised.

* * * * *

"What do we need to be doing while they're gone?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"The knowledge tells me that it might benefit us if we were to practice the release spell. In the past, those that have put forth the extra effort have been rewarded with more stable and powerful assemblies." Reaper carefully explained.

"Then let's do it! Dex and I just have to draw up the elemental earth magic. That's a normal day at work for us." Zanner said with a grin.

"Then please proceed so that I may put your skills to good use." Reaper said frankly.

"Ready?" Zanner asked Dex to be sure.

Dex nodded once with confidence and determination.

Accepting Dex at his word, Zanner began to cast the spell to draw up the elemental energy of the earth.

Reaper watched and listened. It reassured him to see how confidently Zanner and Dex worked together and commanded the earth element, which tended to be somewhat temperamental in less competent and confident hands.

At the sensation of rising elemental magic, Reaper began casting.

As the powers and magics began to build on each other, Reaper came to the realization that as difficult and advanced as the current spell was, when the Magi combined their power and skill, it would result in something on an entirely different level.

"Hey! Isn't that one of the shadows that Milo took through the vinculum?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Do you think it got away from him?" Dex asked as he carefully divided his attention.

"It is more likely a way for Milo to convey the message that he is alive and well." Reaper said reasonably.

"It's kind of hard to know what it means when it can't talk to us." Zanner said frankly.

"Perhaps not." Reaper said thoughtfully, then continued, "But think about what we did with the Cherubim. I asked that they check on the conditions of the others and report their status back to us."

"So it would make sense if Milo was doing the same thing." Dex slowly reasoned.

"If we're wrong, I don't see it being a problem. But if we're right, we can use this shadow to relay a message to Milo."

"Reaper, back off your spell so that I can interrupt my link to the earth." Zanner said seriously.

"Yes. Of course." Reaper immediately responded.

After a moment to get his magical linkages worked out, Zanner finally asked, "So how do we send a message with this thing?"

"I know little of shadowmancy, mostly general concepts. But as I understand it, since the shadow was once human, it knows human concepts and human words. However, unlike ghosts, the existence of a shadow is like a perpetual dream. It has little in the way of waking consciousness."

"So does that mean that we can get it to carry a message for us or not?" Zanner slowly asked.

"Yes. But the longer the message, the more likely it will be to be forgotten or misremembered."

"Okay. We can do that." Zanner said thoughtfully.

"I know what message we should send." Dex said with a smile.

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"Essence of air, hear me. I summon your might. Lend me your power!" G clearly intoned as he hefted his spear.

"In service of nature. Earth into water. Water into air. Air into earth. I summon the magic stored within to right that which has gone wrong." Milo said slowly and reverently.

"Are you certain about that spell? It sounds like something that's going to be impossible for you to balance." Professor Everstone asked slowly.

"No. I don't know very much about magic formation and utilization in groups. I'm just going on what Reaper and Paul told me. From what they said, the three of us will achieve the balance together, each of us taking on as much as we can of our specialties and then as much as we can endure of the others." Milo carefully explained.

"Does this mean that the other two spellcasters are performing their spells right now?" Dr. Williams asked curiously.

"No. If they were, I wouldn't be able to talk to you. I'd be caught up in achieving that balance, then maintaining the flow." Milo explained.

"Then what are you doing?" Filipe asked curiously.

"This is the only way I have to find out if Paul and Reaper are ready."

"Isn't there something more that we can be doing?" Dr. Williams asked uncomfortably.

"I think the best thing that we could do right now is to prepare for when Milo is able to access the full power of his spell."

A movement drew their attention.

"Rhuru-wra came back with me. Obby's going with Ud-wra and Rur-wra to explain things to a few more people before they come back here." Agent Fastbeck said as he walked into the stone structure from the humid forest.

"Does anyone know of anything more that we can do to prepare ourselves for what's about to happen?" Dr. Williams asked firmly.

"We can review the spells that we will be using, if you like. Otherwise, remaining aware and alert seems to be our most prudent course of action." Professor Everstone said frankly.

"When Mr. Darroch called and asked the school for help, I was volunteered due to my wealth of 'real world' experience. I get the feeling, looking at what we're doing, that it might have been better for him to have focused a little more on the power levels and casting skills of those he would be recruiting." Dr. Williams said thoughtfully.

"I'm afraid that's partly my fault. You see, when I called Mr. Darroch, it was on a party line and I had to be very careful about what I said. One can only obfuscate the meaning so much before it is lost. I did my best to let him know of our needs without revealing too much of who we are and what we're doing to anyone who might have been listening."

"Well then, I suppose that does explain a few things. If that's how it happened, it appears that you managed to convey enough of your message, because you seem to have gotten the necessary people to get the job done."

"We could have done with one more spellcaster based in the earth element, but I suppose what we have will have to suffice."

"If you think about it, most spelling endeavours end up falling short on the earth element. There aren't a lot of practitioners and they usually end up having to do more than their share of the work."

"You know, now that you mention it, they do seem to have been underrepresented in the mass spelling efforts that I've participated in."

"Yes. They tend to be underpaid and under appreciated for the important work that they do."

"But those who choose to take up the profession despite that tend to be the most powerful and dedicated. They do it for a love of the craft, and their passion shows through."

"I believe that Mr. Hansen demonstrates those qualities and whether he's conscious of it or not, he seems to have been instillIng them in Zanner."

"I'm quite impressed with how the children seem to be rising to the occasion. Although I see children at school every day, I seldom see them at their best. Such is the nature of my profession, I suppose." Dr. Williams said quietly.

"I believe that seeing them *en masse* might also contribute to that impression. The more brilliant students are hidden from view by the sheer number of average students." Professor Everstone added.

"And the... significantly less than brilliant students not only draw more attention, but usually require it." Dr. Williams said thoughtfully.

"Are we still going to use the spell that Paul and I came up with?" Filipe asked into the silence that followed.

"Yes. For the most part. Certain tasks will need to be divided to be done by separate people, since not all of us can cast multiple spells simultaneously."

"I've never drawn magic from anyone but Paul. Is there anything I need to know before I try?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Yes. You may need to move a bit more slowly than you're used to and be more aware of the individual steps since we'll have to

perform the spells in their proper sequence." Professor Everstone told him carefully.

"Yeah. I thought about that. Working with Paul, everything just flows so smoothly and naturally. It's almost like not doing a spell at all. Once you know what he's trying to do and the steps he's taking to get there, you kind of just climb aboard and go along for the ride."

"One person can't make a cooperative spell work, but one person can certainly spoil the spell. What I'm trying to say is that you shouldn't put Paul on too high a pedestal. While his ability to cast multiple spells simultaneously is quite impressive, his cooperative spelling couldn't succeed without someone who could perform at his level. We're going to be counting on you to give your best performance in the upcoming spelling." Professor Everstone said somberly.

"I don't know if you know this, but Paul and I have another thing in common. Neither one of us knew anything about magic before last year. Because of that, both of us have had to learn a lot of stuff really fast. Not only that, but we also haven't learned all of what we *can't* do. So because of that, please don't tell me how hard it is, just tell me what I have to do and I'll do it."

Before Professor Everstone or Dr. Williams could respond, a fluttering movement drew all their attention.

"What is *that*? Kill it! Kill it!" Filipe screamed as he scampered behind Dr. Williams to hide.

G took up his spear and held it at the ready, waiting for a reason to attack. An icy cold wind began to swell as G focused on his target.

"This is a visitor from another realm. It is unlikely that it means us any harm." Dr. Williams calmly stated.

"What is it?" Filipe asked as he peeked at their strange visitor, still mostly hidden behind Dr. Williams.

Before anyone could answer, a fluttering movement from their other side drew everyone's attention.

"Mah Zah?" G asked with surprise.

The yaggoral demon flew directly to G and landed on his shoulder, as though it were her rightful place and always had been.

A moment later another, nearly identical demon proudly took its place on his other shoulder.

Mah Zah loosed a short growl, but was interrupted by G's shushing motion with his free hand.

"Child of Sword sends greeting and salutations. I am Jael. Here to inquire of well-being." The strange bird/child/thing before them said with difficulty in a poor facsimile of a child's voice.

"We're fine. We've just been deciding what we need to do next." Professor Everstone answered carefully.

"Child of Sword proceeds toward common goal. Will you respond likewise?"

"Yes. That's what I was talking about. We're continuing on just like before we were separated."

"Is good. I will relay to Child of Sword."

Without further adieu, the strange six-winged child/bird monster flung itself out the nearest doorway and took flight with a loud fluttering of wings.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone stared after where Jael had gone.

"Mah Zah says that was a lesser Cherub, a celestial being." G finally announced into the silence.

"What's Mah Zah and Ginh Zah doing here?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Probably the same thing as the angel. I mean, Paul..."

G was interrupted by Mah Zah's growls and hisses.

After a moment of listening, G relayed, "Paul sent Mah Zah and Ginh Zah to check on us and Ginh Zah is going to report back and tell him how we're doing."

"Am I to understand that this demon of yours can carry a message back to Paul for us?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Mah Zah and Ginh Zah can do a whole lot more than that. They're not just demons, they're demonic wizards." G said firmly.

"No disrespect intended." Professor Everstone immediately defended.

"That's okay. I just didn't want you to think that we were dealing with 'pets'. They're people just like us, just of a different species." G said frankly.

"Understood." Dr. Williams said quietly, indirectly indicating that his initial opinion of the yaggoral had been somewhat less than flattering.

Ginh Zah growled and hissed something, then waited for Mah Zah to relay the message to G.

"She wants to know if she should give Paul the same message that we sent with the cherub." G announced.

"So what's she going to tell Paul? That we're proceeding as planned? Is there anything else that he needs to know?" Filipe asked anxiously.

"I'm going to keep trying to unleash the stored magic. Paul and Reaper can join me when they're ready. I'm realizing that this is what it means to be the Magi of Volition. It's not just me wanting it to be, but also my willingness to make it be." Milo said determinedly.

One of the winged reptiles suddenly screeched, then flew away. The other remained on G's shoulder.

"Ginh Zah is going to report back to Paul now. Mah Zah is going to stay here to help us, but she can carry a message to Paul from us, if we need her to." G explained.

"It sounds like we're all on the same page. I guess it's time to get this started."

"Essence of air, hear me. I summon your might. Lend me your power!" G clearly intoned as he hefted his spear.

"In service of nature. Earth into water. Water into air. Air into earth. I summon the magic stored within to right that which has gone wrong." Milo said slowly and reverently.

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"The water within calls the water without. Like summons like and will calls to will." Mr. Bentley Brown formally pronounced.

Paul waited a beat before calling out, "Essence of water, leave excess behind and join with air. Essence of air, renew and restore and purify through the earth. Essence of earth, release the precious water. I beseech."

"Where do you need us?" A man's voice loudly interrupted from outside.

At the sound, Ares immediately motioned for Dark to go outside with him.

Paul was obviously jarred out of his contemplative state. He blinked a few times, then looked around uncertainly.

"Are you okay?" D quietly asked his son.

"Yeah. I wasn't in too deep. It's okay. Milo and Reaper aren't casting yet so..." Paul was saying when he suddenly stopped and looked anxiously toward the archway.

The barrel-chested demon, Xaphan, moved directly in front of Paul and seemed to ignite. Flames were licking and leaping from his fingertips and the tips of his horns.

Frederick stood in a crouched posture, as was normal for him. He stood beside Paul's left hoof with his fangs and claws bared. The low growls emanating from the demon imp left little doubt that he was primed and ready for battle.

The scent of ozone suddenly filled the air as blue electrical sparks arced and sizzled around Nomia. Anyone with the ability to sense magic at all was immediately aware of the dangerous level of magic the tiny demon sprite was emmassing.

There was a long silent moment before an insane cacophony of snarling and barking erupted directly outside the Brynnhollow version of the vinculum chamber.

Paul, flanked by his demons and his father, hurried to the archway while Miss Oaken, Corabeth and Agent Roberts approached more cautiously.

Mr. Bentley Brown remained in place, not betraying if he had even noticed the din.

* * * * *

"What the hell is that?" Paul asked when he saw the multi-winged creature that was being cornered by a bevy of fierce animals, all of them straining against their last vestiges of self-control to keep from tearing the intruder apart.

"Heaven, actually." D said to his son, then called more loudly, "Please don't hurt him! He's an angel! He's probably carrying a message to us from Reaper."

"Okay everyone! You heard the man! Back off!" Agent Roberts called in a clear commanding voice.

One by one, the animals backed away and some of them began to transform into more humanoid forms.

"Please understand, we weren't expecting anyone. You surprised us. You're not hurt are you?" D asked cautiously.

"No harm. I am Zarall, sent by Child of Sword to ask after you and let you know of intention to continue on as planned." The winged creature said in something vaguely resembling a child's voice.

"Don't believe a thing it says! It lies! It's a monster!" Paul ground out past clenched teeth.

"I wonder if anyone's ever said that about you." D said to his son with an icy glare askance at him.

"That's different..." Paul fought to say.

"Is it? You should know better than anyone that you shouldn't judge a person by their species." D told his son in a firm clear voice.

"Usually I'd agree with you about that, but right this minute I can hear the blood in my veins screaming and crying out for the destruction of the celestials. Their existence is an insult to reality." Paul fought to explain.

"Do you feel that way toward Reaper?" D asked in a much softer tone.

"No. It's not the same. Being a celestial isn't what Reaper is, it's what was done to him." Paul explained as he began to calm.

"Like what was done to you?" D hesitantly asked.

"Yeah... I don't know... Maybe. Can we not talk about this right now?" Paul asked frustratedly.

"It's important to me to know that you won't allow yourself to fall victim to your emotions." D carefully explained.

"I can't turn my feelings on and off like that. I'm not built that way." Paul fought to explain.

"Regardless of your feelings, it's important that you be able to maintain a certain level of civility and decorum. I need to know how far I'll be able to trust you when we're approaching a given situation." D said frankly.

Paul looked at his father with exasperation for a moment, then turned to face Zarall and slowly said, "Hail and well met, Zarall of the Cherubim. I am Paul Darroch. Be welcome and assured that you are safe here amongst us."

Paul looked around the gathering as he continued, "Be it known to all that any move made against this being is a move against me and mine."

Silence fell over those gathered as everyone waited for what was going to happen next.

"I accept this courtesy, and will not abuse. Firstly, Child of Sword has asked me to assess him of your condition." Zarall said seriously.

"We are all well. Thank you for asking." Paul carefully responded.

"Secondly, Child of Sword expressed intention to continue with plan to complete common goal and inquired if it is your intention to do same."

"It is." Paul said simply.

"Then I take leave. Relay message." Zarall said while slowly backing away.

"Have a safe and pleasant journey, Zarall." Paul said with icy formality.

In a flurry of activity, the six-winged creature leapt into flight, nearly from a standstill.

After a moment for the angel to be well away from their group, Paul turned to his father and said, "See? I can do it if I have to."

D couldn't help but smile proudly at his son's accomplishment.

"Sorry. We didn't know it was a friend of yours. It just showed up out of nowhere and... we thought we were helping." A man said timidly.

"Thank you for protecting our backs. We appreciate you looking out for us." D said gratefully, then cautiously asked, "By the way, who are you?"

"This is Jazz and his companion Olive... I think you already know everyone else." Agent Roberts said uncertainly.

"Well, thank you again for thinking of us. We weren't expecting anyone, but it's good to know that if someone were going to try to attack us, that they wouldn't be able to do so unanswered." D said diplomatically.

"As far as I know, all any of us are going to have to do is hang around out here and wait for what's going to happen next. There's no reason that we can't stand guard while we're doing that." Ares said frankly.

"I wouldn't ask you to, but if you have nothing better to do, I can't see how it would hurt anything." D said honestly.

"Wait... What's that?" Dark asked as he pointed.

All in attendance turned their attention to where Dark indicated.

"What?..." Cain began to ask, but then saw the dark figure becoming more substantial in front of them.

"That's one of the shadows that Milo called up, isn't it?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yes. And while there's a chance that this one is just misplaced due to the separation of the vinculum, I think it's more likely that Milo's using these shadow beings in much the same way that Reaper is using the Cherubim." D said speculatively.

"And like we've used Paul's demons." Corabeth quietly added.

"Well, if that's the case, then it means that all three groups are at basically the same point and are just waiting for everyone to pull it all together." Paul said thoughtfully.

"So what do we have to do next?" Miss Oaken prompted.

"It looks to me like you guys had better get all your stuff taken care of and get comfortable, because what we're about to get into could take a really long time." Paul said seriously.

"Are you ready to begin?" D asked to confirm.

"Yeah." Paul said decisively, then turn to the shadow creature and simply said, "We're ready."

The shadow creature bowed reverently, then seemed to be swept away by a nonexistent breeze.

"Is there anything you need for us to do?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Even though you do a lot of things for us, the thing that *you* do that no one else can is control the door. So I think that no matter what else you do, you probably need to stay really close to the archway." Paul said frankly.

D slowly and silently nodded his agreement to his son's reasoning.

"Come on, guys." Paul said as he herded his demons back into the vinculum chamber, which in Brynnhollow, looked like a mausoleum.

* * * * *

"The water within calls the water without. Like summons like and will calls to will." Mr. Bentley Brown formally called out as the others around the room carefully and quietly found their places.

Paul waited a beat before calling out, "Essence of water, leave excess behind and join with air. Essence of air, renew and restore and purify through the earth. Essence of earth, release the precious water. I beseech."

D, Miss Oaken and Corabeth were seated in a row and were braced for the onslaught of magic that could assault them at any moment.

In his low demonic voice, in nearly a whisper, Paul calmly began to say, "That which is closed, I now open..."

Chapter 48

"We're ready." Dex said simply, then added more urgently, "Go tell Milo."

The shadow before them whooshed away as if carried on a strong breeze, even though there wasn't any wind to speak of.

"Are you sure that's enough of a message?" Zanner asked uncertainly.

"Well, if we're right about why that shadow was here, then yeah. If we're wrong, then I guess it doesn't matter because we don't know what the question was anyway." Dex reasoned.

"That makes *no* sense. You know that, right?" Zanner asked him cautiously.

"Would you have sent a different message?" Dex asked curiously.

"I don't know. Maybe. I just know that I'd rather not give an answer until I'm more sure of what they're asking." Zanner said frankly.

"I can see what you're saying. But I don't want for everyone at all three sites to have to wait on us to make up our minds. If it turns out that I'm wrong, I'll say that I'm sorry... but I'm pretty sure that I'm right."

"Since when are you so sure of yourself? Aren't you the one who's all timid and barely able to speak?" Zanner asked suspiciously.

"I guess since I got to know you and Paul and G." Dex said thoughtfully, then continued, "I'm still uncomfortable and awkward around people that I don't know and trust. But that doesn't include you... at least not anymore."

"Oh, um. Thanks." Zanner stammered, then hurried to add, "Me too. I mean, you. I got comfortable with you, too."

Dex laughed delightedly before saying, "That sounded about as uncomfortable as it's possible to get."

"I'm not used to having friends, okay? This is probably as weird for me as it is for you."

"How can you not have lots of friends? You're always so happy and upbeat all the time. I'd think that anyone would want to hang around with you."

"Not so much." Zanner said weakly, then explained, "I guess people like me at first, but then they seem to get tired of me. I'll think that I've made a new friend, then one day they'll suddenly not be there anymore and it'll turn out that they ditched me."

"Well, that sucks." Dex said frankly.

"Perhaps we should attempt to begin the Assembly of the Magi." Reaper cautiously suggested.

"Paul was casting for a few seconds, but then he backed out." Dex said carefully.

"Do you think something might be wrong?"

"I have no way of knowing that. Nothing worried me about what I sensed going on, but I guess that doesn't really mean a whole lot." Dex said honestly.

"Maybe he's waiting for us to start." Zanner suggested.

"And maybe he isn't." Dex countered.

"Are you saying that you don't want to start it yet?"

"No. I'm saying that I don't want for us to do something this big and magical and important for the wrong reasons. I'm not scared of calling up the magic. But I *am* afraid of the magic being misused once we've called it up." Zanner said frankly.

"I don't know what I can do but promise not to misuse the power." Reaper said frankly.

"It's not you, Reaper. I promise, it's nothing like that at all. My problem is with us making guesses and plans without knowing for sure what we're doing. This is too important to be done wrong."

"Would you feel better if we waited for the spellcasters to return?" Reaper slowly asked.

"No. I'm pretty sure that we're alright on the spellcasting... I mean, for the barriers and stuff. What I'm talking about is stomping in, like we own the place, and throwing magic around like nothing matters except for the stuff that we care about." Dex fought to explain.

"So are you saying that you think that we shouldn't do it, or that we need to be careful, or what?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"I guess I'm just saying that we're guests here. We need to..." Dex trailed off, obviously searching for the words.

"What?" Zanner whispered.

"...show respect." Dex finally continued.

"We're here trying to save these people's homes. What more do you want?" Zanner asked frankly.

"Friend-Dex is correct." Reaper quietly provided.

"So what are we supposed to do? Or not do? I'm totally lost here." Zanner asked irritably.

"A long time ago, beings of tremendous power established three colonies to protect their most vulnerable children. It was well within their power to relocate them to other realms or to completely isolate them in this one. However, they wanted their children to at least have a *chance* of emerging from their isolation and becoming equal participants in the greater world." Reaper carefully explained.

"I guess that didn't work out too well for them." Zanner said frankly.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. In the fullness of time, any or all of the colonies may be able to join the greater society. You see, we're not

here to witness the end of the story. This event is just one stepping stone along their journey."

"But couldn't the Brynnhollow witches live with humans right now, I mean, if they could just get their transformations worked out? It's really not that big a deal, is it?"

"The arcane knowledge doesn't refer to *this* instance. It nonetheless tells me that a colony of witches would not have been included when the colonies were established. Other arrangements would have been made for them. By what the knowledge tells me, it would seem most likely that another colony had been established, but then failed. The witches would have come along later."

"But if there was a different colony to begin with, how do they make the magic work? They're so interdependent." Zanner asked with difficulty.

"What we're looking at is one plan among many. One part of one plan. A speck on a speck. And yet, from another viewpoint, if we make a wrong decision or take a wrong action, there might be no more Wudewas... anywhere... ever." Dex said passionately.

"Whoa! Where'd that come from?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"*That's* what I've been trying to get you to understand. That's what I was trying to put into words. Before we begin, I need you to know how big and how small what we're doing really is, all at the same time."

"I get it... at least I'm starting to." Zanner said earnestly.

"Does that mean that we may begin?" Reaper asked hopefully.

"Don't we have to wait on Mr. Hansen and them to get back before we call up the magic?"

"It will take time for us to complete the Assembly of the Magi and release the magic for their use. I believe it would be better for us to have the magic ready and waiting for them to take up and use

upon their arrival rather than for us to wait for them to return before we *begin*." Reaper carefully explained.

"Oh, okay." Zanner said with mild surprise at the explanation, then abruptly added, "Yeah. Let's do this."

* * * * *

"Are you having any luck?" Dr. Williams cautiously asked.

"Not yet, but give it a minute. I'm pretty sure it's going to start anytime now." Milo said with determination.

"Um, Mister... um,.Milo. I think you have a visitor." Filipe said hesitantly.

Milo followed his gaze and smiled at the vague shrouded shadow figure that was becoming more solid as it approached him.

"Thank you for helping me Mr. Nail. How is the other team doing? Did they give you any messages for me?" Milo asked gently as he maintained the majority of his focus on his spellcasting.

Milo smiled, then announced to the group, "Reaper's team is doing fine and they say that they're ready."

"Well, Mah Zah says that Paul and them are okay, so I guess that means that there's no reason for us to hold back." G said frankly.

"Have you been holding back?" Milo asked with surprise.

"No! I just didn't give it one hundred percent because I wasn't sure if everyone was alright or not." G fought to explain.

"I'm pretty sure that's what holding back means." Filipe said frankly.

"You've been hanging around Paul too much." G playfully groused.

"Maybe I have. Paul is someone who puts it all on the line and gives it his all. I'm going to do my best to be just like him. Do *you* plan on doing less?" Filipe challenged.

"I've just been saving my best for when it was needed. I don't want to wear myself out too early." G explained self-assuredly.

Before he could respond, Filipe was distracted by a movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Milo, here's another one." Filipe said, once he had realized what he was seeing.

A gentle smile preceded Milo saying, "Thank you Timothy. I've already received a message from the Brynnhallow camp, but I appreciate you checking on them, just the same."

"Okay. Then are we ready to do this?" Filipe asked anxiously.

"Agent Fastbeck, will you and Rhuru-wra be able to keep an eye on how things are going with the Wudewas? Once this gets started, I can't be sure if I'll be able to keep track of all that's happening." Milo asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure that's what we're doing here. You can count on us." Conrad assured him.

"Spellcasters? Are you ready?" Milo asked cautiously.

"Yes. Proceed as you will." Professor Everstone said calmly.

"What about you, G? You ready?" Milo asked with concern.

"Yeah. One hundred percent." G assured him.

Milo slowly raised his hands and seemed to be concentrating.

One by one, those around the room realized that Milo was spellcasting. No one knew what he intended to do, but they remained silent to allow him to concentrate on his work.

A movement from one of the archways caused one after another of those present to turn and look at those approaching.

"Although I probably won't be needing the services of my choir, I'd feel better if they were here to support me, just the same." Milo said introspectively.

"That's fine. Do whatever you have to do, just get on with it." Agent Fastbeck said irritably.

Milo looked at him with surprise.

"We're all here to do just one thing. The rest of us can't do our part until you've started yours." Agent Fastbeck explained.

"I just wanted to be sure that everyone was ready..." Milo began.

"We're ready. Do it!"

"Okay, okay. I will. But I think there's one thing that you're forgetting."

"What's that?"

"Unless I have the will for it to be so, it's not going to happen. No matter how much you push or nag me, we're not going to start one second before I'm ready." Milo said frankly.

"But what's the point of waiting?" Filipe asked anxiously.

"There's no point. I'm not holding us back intentionally. I'm just saying that, for whatever reason, I'm not ready."

"'For whatever reason?' What's that supposed to mean?" Agent Fastbeck challenged.

"That means that there's nothing you can do to change this. It's out of your hands."

"Why are you holding us back?" Filipe quietly asked.

"Please trust me. I'll start when I'm supposed to, and not before."

"Okay. How long do you think it's going to be?"

"I can't be sure, but what I *can* tell you is that it won't hurt a thing for us to practice and work on our synchronization." Milo said seriously.

"I guess it's better than not doing anything at all." Filipe aggrievedly muttered under his breath.

"He's definitely been spending time with Paul." Agent Fastbeck said with a barely restrained grin at the boy.

"G, go ahead and start whenever you're ready and I'll jump in when my part comes." Milo instructed.

"Is this for practice or for real?" G asked cautiously.

"It could end up going either way. If you approach it as though it were real, then you won't be caught unprepared if things suddenly fall into place." Milo said carefully.

"Alright then. Hang on. I'm going to give it all I've got." G said firmly.

Milo smiled with satisfaction and gave a slight nod to indicate that he was ready.

* * * * *

"How's it going, Paul?" D quietly asked, not wanting to be unnecessarily jarring.

"From the feel of this, you might want to get everyone settled into their places. We could be ready to start at any moment." Paul said carefully.

"Can you tell if the others have started casting yet?"

"They haven't, but I can feel the ripples of them preparing."

A quick squawk and hiss preceded the arrival of the red and black winged lizard.

"How's G?" Paul immediately asked.

D waited anxiously for Paul to translate what Ginh Zah was telling him.

"He's fine, just worried about us." Paul told his father with a quick tender smile.

Ginh Zah hissed again and drew Paul's attention.

"Yeah. We're going to be starting any minute." Paul told her seriously, then explained, "I'm probably going to be immobilized while I'm spellcasting. Xaphan is going to see to our defense, but if someone needs some kind of magical help, I'd like for you to take care of it for them."

Ginh Zah growled inquisitively.

"No. If you want to communicate with someone, tell Xaphan what you want to say and he can translate for you." Paul said firmly.

Ginh Zah hissed once and Paul nodded his confirmation before looking around the group and continuing, "If anyone needs some magical help while we're out of action, Ginh Zah will be able to help you."

"Like with what?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Like if it gets dark and all the magic users are incapacitated, you can ask Ginh Zah to make some light for you. While it's possible that I might need her help for something, most likely she'll be available to help you if you need it." Paul carefully explained.

After a long quiet moment, Agent Roberts hesitantly asked, "Did she happen to see if my shadow was there and if he's alright?"

Paul listened to Ginh Zah's response before relaying, "Sorry. She didn't hear or see anything about him."

"I'm sure he's probably okay. I just had to ask." Agent Roberts timidly explained.

"Everyone! Get ready! I think this is it." Paul said loudly.

"Are you ready for me to start again?" Mr. Bentley Brown cautiously asked.

"Yes. Get the chalice powered up. We need to jump on before this thing takes off without us." Paul said urgently.

"They *can't* do it without us. Worst case scenario... they have to stop and start the whole thing over again." Corabeth said frankly.

Demon form or no, the withering look that Paul sent her way was quite impressive.

"I believe that Paul would take it personally if the others had to slow down or stop due to our group's inability to keep up with them." D told the group honestly.

"When you put it that way, Paul's not the only one here who'd have a problem with *that*." Corabeth said with renewed vigor.

"Paul?" Mr. Bentley Brown asked in a low voice.

"Yeah." Paul responded.

"Let's do it."

* * * * *

"What the... Reaper! Your *friends* are back." Zanner said with a bit of disgust carried under his words.

"Yes, thank you." Reaper said calmly, then cautiously asked, "What do you have to report of the conditions of the others?"

"All are well." Zarall said simply.

"Did they give you any messages for me?" Reaper asked more slowly.

"The *demon* said he would proceed according to plan." Zarall said with more than a little disgust at even saying the word 'demon'.

"The verminous animal creatures claim likewise." Jael announced.

"We are currently in the process of unfolding this pocket of space and recasting the barrier that protects the Nephilim. Are the two of you capable of assisting with the spellcasting in such an endeavour?" Reaper asked curiously.

"We are capable..." Zarall reluctantly admitted.

"Then I will invoke the name of my father and entreat you to lend your aid until this matter is resolved." Reaper said firmly.

"We were summoned only to relay messages for you." Jael interjected.

"That is a lie." Reaper said flatly, then waited a dramatic beat before continuing, "You were sent here to assist me as needed. You will be released from my father's command when your assistance is no longer required."

"The intent..." Zarall began to say when he was harshly interrupted.

Reaper spoke loudly in a language that Zanner and Dex couldn't identify.

The fan of arms from Reaper's back began to flex and thrash in irritation as his words became louder.

Both Zanner and Dex reflexively backed away as Reaper seemed to grow bigger and move nearer the winged cherubs, looming over them.

Abruptly, Reaper stopped his tirade and silence seemed to hang in the air.

"I trust that we understand each other." Reaper said dispassionately.

After a long moment, Zarall finally turned to Dex and Zanner and quietly said, "Apologies. We seldom visit this realm. Unaccustomed to speaking with monkeys... Apologies again. I have heard that your people are sensitive. Don't like to be reminded..."

"It's fine. Some of us are more sensitive than others." Zanner assured him.

Zarall seemed to accept him at his word, then looked to Reaper for further instructions.

"Zanner, whenever you're ready, we may begin." Reaper said serenely.

"For real this time?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Yes. Proceed as you will."

"Are you ready for this?" Zanner asked Dex cautiously.

"I'm an Oriad. This is what I exist for." Dex said simply.

"That may be part of what you are, but it isn't all of it." Zanner said firmly.

"I wasn't saying it like it's a bad thing. I like having a reason for being." Dex said honestly.

"I'd kinda like it if you had more than one... I mean, it'd be cool if after this was all over we could hang out and stuff." Zanner said awkwardly.

"I guess that gives us another reason to survive." Dex said with a grin.

"Since when do you joke around when things are serious?" Zanner asked with exaggerated surprise.

"Since I learned it from a friend." Dex responded timidly.

"Were you going to perform the assembly spell or engage in courting rituals?" Reaper asked facetiously.

"Well... I guess, since we're here... we might as well." Zanner said with an increasing grin.

"I'm solidly connected to the earth. Whenever you're ready." Dex said confidently.

"I summon the magic of the earth to rise up and do my bidding. Bend to my will..."

* * * * *

"You're trying to stir up the *magic* of wind, not the *actual* wind." Milo said firmly.

"Bitch, bitch, bitch. Just let me do my job and be ready to pop the top off this thing when the time comes." G said sourly.

"Yes. But before I do that, do you think you can call up the magic without making it *quite* so windy?" Milo asked hopefully.

"I'll see what I can do." G reluctantly granted.

A loud growl from the doorway drew a sliver of G's attention and he glanced that way.

"Okay. I'm sorry, Rhuru-wra. I didn't mean to mess up your hair." G said as he fought to keep his increasing magical output completely under his control.

"How are you doing G? Is it too much for you?" Milo asked with concern.

"This is barely the beginning. If you're worried at this stage of things, you're going to be a wreck before we cross the finish line."

"I'm just asking because of your *apparent* lack of control." Milo said seriously.

"Um, yeah. Why don't *you* try to control the wind and see how much luck you have." G suggested.

"So you don't have *any* control over it?" Milo asked anxiously.

"Now you ask..." G muttered, then slowly explained, "I have complete and absolute control over the wind that is part of my spell. What I *don't* have control over is the magical essence of the Mikael Spear. It does whatever it wants to do. If I try to exert too

much control over it, the thing will just get constipated or something like that and refuse to channel any magic at all."

"Well, we can't have that..." Milo began to say.

"Not if we're still planning on accessing the mega magic stored in the vinculum." G immediately added.

After a moment to examine G's serious expression, Milo quietly said, "Now I understand. I won't assume that any stray breezes are evidence of your lack of control."

"Good..." G began to say when Mah Zah loosed a growley little hiss.

G seemed to consider for a moment, then said, "Yeah. Go ahead."

Everyone watched as the dragon-lizard demon launched herself off G's shoulder and into the air.

"Rhuru-wra, Mah Zah said that she's going to cast a spell around you to obstruct the wind. She's not putting the spell 'on' you, but it will follow you around and keep your hair from blowing like crazy for the next few hours." G carefully explained.

Rhuru-wra let loose a lusty growl, and although G couldn't directly translate the meaning, he couldn't miss the passion behind it.

"He says 'thanks' and that he really appreciates it." Agent Fastbeck translated.

"Are we ready to kick this thing into gear?" G asked as he kept the majority of his concentration on building his magic.

"I believe so. Ud-wra and Rur-wra are back. Did you need for them to come inside for anything?" Agent Fastbeck asked cautiously.

"No, but if Obby is with them, I'd like for him to come in here to stand with me." Milo said slowly as he kept the majority of his attention on G's progress.

"Obby? Milo wants you. He's inside." Agent Fastbeck called through the archway.

A moment later, the three dimensional humanoid shadow hurried into the room, directly to Milo.

"Did you have a good time visiting the Wudewas village?" Milo asked warmly.

Obby seemed to be animatedly explaining something, although no one could hear anything but the wind rushing through the mossy stone pillars of the Southseid incarnation of the vinculum chamber.

Milo smiled and slightly chuckled before saying, "I'm glad that you had the chance to make some new friends."

Obby slowly, but very deliberately, moved in and gave Milo a firm hug.

"I'm going to be tied up with a fairly complex spellcasting for the next few hours. I was wondering if you'd like to help me while I'm doing that." Milo asked cautiously.

Obby pulled out of the hug and seemed, by his posture, to be surprised.

"I'm probably going to be mentally tied into what's going on and unable to do much to care for myself. I was just wondering if you would watch after my body if I seem to lose the ability to do so." Milo asked carefully.

Obby moved in and hugged Milo again, this time more assertively.

Milo laughed with delight, then said, "I'll take that as a 'yes'."

Obby stood back and appeared to be awaiting his instructions.

"I can't tell you exactly what I'm going to need you to do, because I don't know. If I *did* know, I could just instruct my choir in advance."

Obby gave a visible nod to indicate his understanding.

"Basically, just watch after me. Make sure that if I'm sitting or lying, that I'm in a comfortable position... things like that." Milo said frankly.

Obby reached one of his semi-transparent hands up to cup Milo's cheek for a moment, simply to demonstrate his affection.

"Thank you, Obby. I'm glad you're here." Milo said as he placed his hand over Obby's for a brief moment.

"Um, guys... I'm about to hit the next level here. You might want to be prepared." G called out over a rushing wind.

"Don't worry. We're ready." Milo assured him confidently.

* * * * *

"Do you need for us to do anything?"

The sound drew Paul's attention and he turned to see Ares, Dark, Olive and Jazz, standing in the archway, wanting nothing more than to help in some way.

"Just make sure that your people are prepared. If everyone works together, you'll be holding the magic that we'll be using to keep your people safe for years to come." Paul said carefully.

"Yeah. I kinda knew that. But what I was really asking was if there's anything 'real' that we can do 'right now' that will help or make any kind of difference. We can be as patient as we need to be, but that's only after we've done all that needs doing." Ares fought to explain.

"Okay. I guess there is one more thing that you *could* do." Paul said thoughtfully.

Those at the archway were standing in a row and waiting with anticipation for his next words.

"Magic is magic. There's not really 'good' or 'evil' per se, although it can be derived from celestial or infernal sources... that doesn't matter for what we're doing. What I'm trying to say is that it's possible to 'flavor' the magic with venomous hatred or good intentions. The more uniform the 'flavor' the more easily the magic can be used."

Paul could tell that the witches in the archway were about to lose patience with his explanation.

"It might help if you went out and 'coached' some of the people who will be holding the magic for us. Try to keep them united in their vision of concern for their community and loved ones." Paul explained.

"And this will help?" Olive asked cautiously.

"It won't hurt." Paul said automatically, then explained, "I can't promise that it'll make a big difference, but there is a chance that it might."

"If it's a question of doing something or doing nothing, I think I know what I'd rather do." Jazz announced from Olive's side.

"But don't you need us here to serve as a retention pond?" Dark cautiously asked.

"I'm going to need Ares here to serve as a focal point. And the more that I think of it, having a few of you here to stand guard sounds like a good idea. But as long as the rest of you remain within the confines of Brynnhollow, you should be able to serve your purpose just as well as if you were physically here." Paul carefully explained.

"But you want for us to make sure that people are happy... right?" Jazz asked uncertainly.

"They don't have to be happy. But it'd be nice if they were proud of doing the right things to help their friends, families and neighbors. If nothing else, they can hold onto the fact that by participating in what we're doing here today, they will be helping to insure that there *will be* future generations."

"Paul. A moment of your time, if you please." Mr. Bentley Brown hesitantly interrupted.

"Yeah. What's up?" Paul asked as he reoriented his awareness.

Mr. Bentley Brown looked at him impassively for a moment, allowing him to get his bearings.

"Dex is up and running." Paul said slowly, then quickly added, "Looks like G is kicking up some dust!"

"Then does that mean that you're about ready to release the stored magic?" D asked cautiously.

"We're one step closer. Right this minute, everything is hanging on Mr. Bentley Brown." Paul said simply, then added, "I held the Third Grail. I have an idea of how much skill and force of will it takes to wield that power. Mr. Bentley Brown is the right person to do this job."

"Thank you Paul, but you don't have to say that." Mr. Bentley Brown said humbly.

"You're a member of this team. The rest of the team needs to know that you're doing a *real* job and playing a *real* part in the spell. They need to know that the job you're doing is hard and needs a powerful and skilled witch to do it. You're not just some bozo who got recruited because you happened to be there."

"The water within calls the water without. Like summons like and will calls to will." Mr. Bentley Brown said very precisely.

"You're probably right." Paul said with a smile at his response, or lack thereof, then continued, "There's a time to talk about it and a time to do it."

Paul took a moment to assess his situation and that of those around him before calmly intoning, "Essence of water, leave salts and sediments behind and join with air. Essence of air, renew and restore through the filter of earth. Essence of earth, yield that which has been purified, the precious water. I beseech."

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"Um... is this supposed to happen?" Zanner asked uncertainly.

"I don't know. I've never heard of it happening before." Dex whispered in response.

"Wait. Can you feel that? We're not really here. This is some kind of a magical construct." Zanner said slowly, then asked, "G? Are you doing this?"

"No. It's not me. But you're right. We're not really here. I can taste the sorcery at work. Whatever this is, it's *old* magic. This spell was originally cast aeons ago." G carefully explained.

"The spell resides within the chalice." Mr. Bentley Brown said as he materialized in their dream-space.

"Are you doing this to us?" Zanner asked with a tinge of fear running through his essence.

"No. The chalice is doing this all on its own. This *feature* of the chalice gives us the ability to synchronize our efforts more effectively." Mr. Bentley Brown carefully explained.

"So, if I'm getting this right, we're still each back where we were before, but our consciousness is here... how does that help us?" G asked cautiously.

"Time moves differently here. This place exists at the speed of thought. While we're here, we can plot and plan. We can consider alternatives and work collectively to come to the best decisions for us all. When we return, only a fraction of a second will have passed."

"So time crawls just like in augury class." Zanner muttered.

"I can see why Paul likes you." G said with a grin at Zanner, then turned to Mr. Bentley Brown and asked, "So how do we use it?"

"At the beginning of each stage, we will be drawn back here to compare our experiences and plan for what we're going to do next." Mr. Bentley Brown carefully explained.

"But what about the sorcery spell? How did that happen? I've never heard anything about a spell like this being on an ancient relic." G asked cautiously.

"Yes. About that." Mr. Bentley Brown said reluctantly, "This *feature* of the chalice isn't commonly known. In fact, if I hadn't been asked to take up the chalice, you likely never would have found out about it. I very nearly told Paul and his team about the spell, but fortunately I was able to resist the urge."

"So this isn't something that always happens in an Assembly of the Magi?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"No. This feature of the chalice was included to aid the holders of artifacts and wielders of pure elemental magics. I would appreciate it very much if you wouldn't announce the existence of it. The Third Grail might be neutralized or otherwise destroyed in an effort to excise the sorcery from the artifact."

"Yeah. I can see people wanting to have access to a real-life chatroom." G said honestly.

"So what do we need to do now?" Zanner asked curiously.

"Unless I am mistaken, all of us are currently working to empower our Magi. We're pulling up the elemental essence to give them enough power to unlock the magic stored in the vinculum." Mr. Bentley Brown said carefully.

"Yeah. But do you have any idea of what's going to happen after that? I don't think anyone's said." Zanner asked cautiously.

"What happens next isn't of interest to anyone but us." Mr. Bentley Brown said seriously.

"What's that?" G cautiously prompted.

"Once we've reached peak magic and given our respective Magi the ability to release the magic stored in the vinculum, then we have to maintain the flow of elemental magic to keep the channel open for them. From that point on, our Magi will be doing all the

noticeable work, but all of us will have to fight to maintain the level of elemental magic to support them. If any of us fail..." Mr. Bentley Brown trailed off, to highlight the severity of the sentiment.

"...we all do." Zanner dutifully supplied.

Chapter 49

"What are you doing?" Reaper asked cautiously.

"You wanted earth magic, you're going to get it. Brace yourself. Here it comes."

"Seriously. You'd better get ready. It'll be coming your way any second." Dex added in a warning tone.

The low rumbling sound was deep and distant at first, but rose up and permeated each of them, deep in their bones.

"Must leave to safety!" Zarall screeched.

"Stay where you are! Things are moving faster than planned and I may need for you to be here to accept the released magic of the vinculum." Reaper said sternly.

"Too much! Too much!" Zarall and Jael both chirped.

"Shut up! You'll do it because you have no other choice! I *will* release the magic to you. Whether you make use of it or are washed away by it will be up to you!" Reaper barked.

"The magma rises. The mantle... splits..." Zanner said past clenched teeth.

"Guys! You'd better do whatever you're going to do. He's about to hit the next level... You might want to hold on to something!" Dex suddenly exclaimed.

Reaper flexed all his arms and seemed to grow another foot taller. His corpse-like face took on a less 'dead' appearance, but he somehow seemed even more frightening.

"Mountains rise. Mountains fall, churning, growing, ever changing..." Zanner said distantly, somewhere between spellcasting and a bizarre stream of consciousness.

"Watch out! He's going deep. You'd better hang on!" Dex screamed as he crouched in place to maintain his balance.

The entire room was shaking and rumbling from the sounds of destruction all around them.

"Not safe! Must leave!" Zarall demanded.

"You're immortal! If you get hurt, you'll heal. Don't be such a baby!" Reaper scowled at them, then suddenly fell silent.

Reaper's eyes went wide as an abrupt wave of magical energy impacted him.

The force of it was so great that it was almost visible to the naked eye.

"We should go before he recovers." Jael whispered as it began to back away.

"No. Child of Sword is correct. We stay. We do this." Zarall said firmly.

"That's it." Zanner said in a strangely calm voice.

"That's what?" Dex asked cautiously as he looked around uncertainly.

"That's the level of power that Reaper's going to need me to keep up for him. I just have to hold it here." Zanner said carefully.

"For how long?" Dex asked anxiously, already knowing the answer.

"For as long as it takes." Zanner said simply, just to confirm that they both understood the situation.

"Administering the magic of the earth, I summon that which is stored herein to restore the sanctuary of the Nephilim." Reaper muttered in a nearly trance-like voice. "Father, guide my hand, may it be steady and true as I cast. Father, guide my heart, may my motive be pure and benevolent toward those I affect. Father, guide my thought, lead me to see truth of what my actions cause to be.

Father, give me strength, that I may complete my task. I ask not only as your child, but also as Melchior, the Magi of Arcane Knowledge. I entreat you to let it be so."

Dex noticed the cherubim fearfully watching the spectacle.

"Nothing's probably going to happen for a while. The magic won't really take hold until the other two Magi have cast their spells." Dex told them quietly.

"Yes. Is good. We prepare. Much to do." Zarall said determinedly.

Dex smiled at the response, then turned his concerned gaze on Zanner, who was struggling to keep his magical flow constant.

* * * * *

"I can't breathe!" Filipe suddenly gasped.

"Don't panic. The feeling will soon pass. This is simply a manifestation of G assuming control of his natural element." Professor Everstone calmly explained.

"Does that mean that G could take control of our air and suffocate us whenever he wants?" Filipe asked slowly, as he caught his breath.

"Yes. He could do so on a whim at any time, with only the slightest thought." Professor Everstone confirmed.

"One should always show respect for their fellow witches, but that much more for witches who have mastered the pure elements." Dr. Williams quietly added.

"The power he's whipping up is massive." Filipe said in a small voice.

"It has to be for the job that he's been called upon to do." Professor Everstone said simply.

"Milo. You ready for this?" G asked with strain in his voice.

"Yes. I'll be ready whenever you are." Milo said calmly.

"Well, you asked for it!" G called out with almost maniacal delight as he released the magic of the air element.

"Brace yourselves!" Professor Everstone automatically warned.

There was a moment of stillness and silence.

Just as suddenly as the wind had stopped, it began again, only this time in reverse.

Although the blowing of the wind had been uncomfortable before, the vacuuming sensation of being pulled toward the Mikael Spear inspired an entirely different range of emotions.

"Yes. That's enough! Hold it right there!" Milo abruptly called out.

"You got it! This isn't too bad. Do what you need to do and I'll keep it going." G said confidently.

"That's a LOT of magic. Do you need for me to do something to help?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"Just be as prepared as you can for when you have to cast the barrier. What G is giving me is a drop in the bucket compared to what I will soon be releasing." Milo said carefully.

"Do you have any estimate of when you will be ready to release the stored magic?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"I know what the next step is, but there's no way to estimate a timetable. Each stage will naturally occur as a result of what happens before it. When all three Magi have cast their spells, the next stage will begin, but I have no way of knowing when that will be or how long that next stage will take." Milo explained.

"I'm not familiar with this part of the process. What needs to be done next?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"When I feel it is right to do so, I will cast the spell to break the seal on the vinculum." Milo said, even more slowly.

"Do you have any idea of how long it will be before you're ready to do that?" Professor Everstone asked in a leading tone.

"Yes. The time is now." Milo said simply.

There was a long moment that would have been silence except for the sound of the wind stirring and rushing around them.

"Administering the magic of the air and the aether, I summon that which is stored herein to restore the sanctuary of the Wudewas." Milo said in a strong clear voice. "Father, perfect my aim, let me change only that which will benefit. Father, guide my spirit, let it soar with rapturous freedom. Father, guide my wisdom that I may remember lessons learned. Father, lend me power enough to protect my chosen charges. I ask not only as your child, but also as Gaspar, the Magi of Volition. I entreat you, let it be so."

"Is this like when you call on Cernunnos? Or are you calling on your *actual* father?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"It's better that you don't interrupt him at this stage of things." Dr. Williams said quietly.

"But nothing's happening." Filipe cautiously responded, trying to identify what he was missing about the situation.

"There may be nothing happening right this moment, but when the third Magi completes his spell... we need to be prepared." Dr. Williams said anxiously.

"How bad is it going to be?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"There's no possibility that we would survive if we were hit with the full force of the magical tsunami that will be turned loose. With the way we're planning on spreading the magic over a great number of people... I won't lie. It's going to be tough. But I agree with Professor Everstone. We *should* be able to manage it." Dr. Williams said frankly.

"And if we can't." Filipe asked cautiously.

"Then, most likely, some people will die."

"Like the Wudewas?" Filipe asked anxiously.

"The Wudewas, the Nephilim, the Brynns, maybe even some of the people of Waxell. It's all so interdependent, if one were to fail, the others might come tumbling down like dominos all in a row. In theory, the chain reaction *could* destroy everyone within the area."

"How can we keep that from happening?" Filipe asked quietly.

"Be prepared. When the time comes, stand up and cast your spell, knowing that by using our combined powers, we'll be able to remake the Wudewas barrier to protect them for generations to come." Dr. Williams said firmly.

"How do I prepare?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"Come. The three of us will go through the entire barrier spell again. We must get to the point where we will all be able to cast it, no matter how overwhelmed we are by the magic."

"How are you doing, G?" Milo asked as he maintained his concentration on his spell.

"Holding steady. Just waiting on you." G said frankly.

"My part is done. Now we're waiting on the others."

* * * * *

"This is good." D muttered as he watched his son's spellcasting.

"That's the weaving of the spells together, isn't it?" Corabeth slowly asked.

"Yes. Since the spells are based in three elements, that's the best way to combine them." Miss Oaken said instructively.

"So now Paul has to cast his 'water' version of the release spell... right?" Corabeth asked cautiously.

"Yes. At least, that's my understanding of it. To be honest, I've never really had a reason to study about things like this, so I mostly just know the theory behind it all." Miss Oaken said frankly.

There was a long moment of silence, until Corabeth quietly asked, "Is he welling the magic building up to a release?"

"No. The release requires a steady flow... I don't know what he's waiting for." Miss Oaken reluctantly admitted.

"I'm trying to figure out the next spell." Paul said in response to her statement.

"I wasn't trying to rush you. Take all the time that you need." Miss Oaken said hurriedly.

"It's nothing like that." Paul said distractedly, then explained, "As a demon, I have a natural... or supernatural... knowledge of certain spells. So I know what the next spell's supposed to be. The problem is, I can't cast that spell the way that it's written. It would go against what I believe is good and right. But if I change the spell so that I can cast it with a clear conscience, I can't be sure that it's going to work with the other Magi spells."

"Spells will come and go, but no matter what, you have to live with yourself." D told his son solemnly.

"Thanks Dad. That's all I needed to hear." Paul said with a loving grin at his father.

"Administering the magic of water, I summon that which is stored herein to restore the sanctuary of the cursed bloodline. Father of my heart, guide my hand, may it be flawless in precision. Father of my blood, guide my heart, that I may have the will to overcome. Father of my heart, guide my mind to be clear and focused. Father of my blood, give me strength to meet the need. I ask not only as your child, but also as Balthasar, the Magi of Composition. I entreat you to let it be so." Paul called to the distant heavens, with his true emotion carrying through his words.

The words lingered in the air for a moment, somewhere between an echo and a magical chime.

"I don't get what you just did, but I can believe that it wasn't the way it was originally written." Corabeth finally said, breaking the silence.

"Yeah. Once I got started, the words kinda just came out on their own."

"Did it do something or did you kill the spell?"

"I think something happened, I'm just not sure if it's something good." Paul said hesitantly.

"What do you mean?" Corabeth asked cautiously.

"Look outside."

* * * * *

"What just happened?" Dex suddenly asked.

"What do you mean?" Zanner asked slowly.

"My connection to the earth, it's changed." Dex said seriously.

"Um, I think there's a really good reason for that." Zanner said hesitantly.

"What's that?" Dex asked as he fought to strengthen his bond with the earth.

"Dorothy, we're not in Kansas anymore." Zanner said weakly as he pointed at the view through the stone archway.

After a long moment of staring, Dex whispered, "We're not in Kansas, we're not even on *earth* anymore."

"Where *is* this place?" Zanner asked as he looked in wonder at the bizarrely colored abstract landscape.

"In some sense, you could say that this isn't anyplace. It doesn't entirely exist. But from what I've been told, some of your people have referred to it as Bifrost, the rainbow bridge." Reaper said informatively.

"But where *are* we?" Zanner demanded to know.

"It appears that rather than calling additional power into my spell, I somehow transported us to the place where I can ask for the power in person." Reaper said slowly.

"We should not be here. We were not summoned." Zarall said firmly.

"What are you saying? Does that mean that we're about to meet your dad?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Yes. That is, if he chooses to answer the summons I inadvertently made, that is exactly what it means."

"Is it okay if we meet your dad? I mean, are you going to be ashamed of us or anything like that?"

"No. Of course not. The thing is, angels have a strict social hierarchy and are ranked into choirs by their level of celestial power. Humans and witches don't even *exist* in their ranking system, so I can't predict how he will react to you... if at all." Reaper said carefully.

"If they don't think of humans as people, then how did the Nephilim even happen?"

"That was a long time ago. A group of angels was sent to a foreign realm to 'civilize' the natives, you know, to get their civilization going in the right direction. Apparently, things didn't end up going as planned and the angels ended up staying longer than expected. Over time, they took lovers and wives from among the mortal women."

"Yeah. I kinda knew that, but I guess what I wanted to know is that if angels look at humans and witches as being lesser creatures... I

mean, was it like they fell in love or was it just..." Zanner trailed off uncomfortably.

"...a booty call." Dex timidly added to clarify.

"I wasn't there, so I can only speculate. And even so, it's not my place to judge the motives of angels. We have different lives and follow different rules."

"I don't know. I mean, big strong angel, stupid weak human... it sounds kinda rapey to me." Zanner said frankly.

"It might be best if you weren't to say such things in front of my father." Reaper cautioned.

"Yeah. If you're the 'Child of Sword', that'd make your dad 'Sword'. Just from the name, I don't think I want to piss him off." Zanner said honestly.

* * * * *

"What did you just do?" Filipe asked as he looked around in panic.

"It wasn't me!" G immediately defended.

"I don't think it was any of us." Milo said uncertainly.

"This place, it isn't a place at all." Dr. Williams said cautiously as he looked out the archway at a waist deep dense fog which seemed to go on forever. The white fog was clearly visible, although there was no source of illumination in evidence. Beyond that, there was deep, all-consuming, infinite blackness.

"This is the netherland between the human world and the faerie kingdoms." Milo confirmed.

"How did we imbalance the spell to the degree to bring us here?" Professor Everstone slowly puzzled aloud.

"This room, this *vinculum* that we're in, was designed to exist outside normal space, so it probably wouldn't be all that difficult to

dislodge it... I mean, compared to dislodging any other location from normal time/space." Dr. Williams said speculatively.

"I don't think we did this. I think it was either Reaper or Paul." Milo said slowly.

"Why do you believe that, if I may ask?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"G and I did our parts of the spell flawlessly. There wasn't the slightest fluctuation. Whatever happened here doesn't have anything to do with what we were doing. I'm certain of it." Milo stated emphatically.

"He's right. This isn't us." G confirmed.

"That being the case, there is likely little that we can do to remedy this situation." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. In fact, unless you know of something that we can do that might help Paul or Reaper fix it, we should probably do our best to keep our hands off of things. Pretty much anything we do could make it harder for them to sort this out." G said thoughtfully.

"Yes. We will refrain from taking any action unless we can be assured that it will not adversely impact the efforts of others to restore us to our own realm." Professor Everstone agreed.

"What's a matter, Obby?" Filipe asked, noticing the shadow's stooped posture.

"He's missing Shawn." Milo said simply.

"Is being apart from Agent Roberts for so long hurting him?" Filipe asked with concern.

"Only emotionally. Obby's his own independent being now. He doesn't ever have to go back to Shawn if he doesn't want to. But they've been together ever since the first time light fell on Shawn and cast a shadow. Obby left on an adventure for a while, but now he's feeling the absence of what's familiar to him." Milo explained.

"Rhuru-wra wants to know how long it's going to take to get us back to his father and brother." Agent Fastbeck asked professionally.

"At this point, it's out of our hands. As soon as we can do something to help rectify the situation, we will." Professor Everstone said helplessly.

The attention of those around the room were drawn to Mah Zah's growling.

When G noticed everyone looking at them curiously, he said, "Mah Zah just wanted me to know that she has a lot of knowledge and experience when it comes to establishing interdimensional gates. If you end up having to do any kind of magic to get us out of here, she'll be willing to help."

"My own knowledge of the subject isn't quite what it should be, so the inclusion of someone with more recent experience will be a welcomed addition." Professor Everstone said seriously.

G smiled at the words, then told Mah Zah, "If we have to try and fix this ourselves, he'll consult you."

* * * * *

"Paul, we've never really talked about the whole demon thing before..." Corabeth said as she kept the majority of her attention focused outside the archway, "...but now that you've sent us to HELL, I think maybe it's time that we discussed some boundaries."

"I didn't mean... I don't know how I did this." Paul stammered.

"I think the most logical place to look would be at the last spell that you cast. I think that it has the most potential to be the cause of our current situation." D said reasonably.

"Um, yeah. But all I did is change the call to the father. The way the spell was written before, I was calling through my blood to my ancestors, for magic and control to aid my spell. I just thought that rather than do that, I could split the call between you and my

biological father. I just wanted for you to be included... I didn't think it would cause something like this." Paul scrambled to explain.

"I think I see the problem. You basically summoned your father with your blood and me with your words. By splitting the call the way that you did, you sort of 'lassoed' us both and pulled us toward you. In doing so, you brought me toward him and him toward me. As a result, the spell reacted with the dimensionally unstable vinculum chamber and threw us out of our own time/space to a place where we are nearest your father." D carefully explained.

"So how can we undo it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I can think of two ways. The first is rather complicated and time consuming. I don't know if you've covered how to 'dismantle' a spell in your classes yet."

"Yeah. We've done it in basic magic, but not that much. Even undoing a little spell can take hours." Paul said reluctantly.

"That's right. We would have to unweave the spell, bit by bit, strand by strand, until the magic was completely undone." D agreed.

"What's the other way?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Complete the execution of the initial spell. Once your magical goal has been achieved, the spell will be concluded and we might even go back to our own time/space without having to do anything extra." D finished with an expectant smile.

"Maybe I'm just being stupid, but what does that mean? How do I complete the execution of the spell?" Paul asked slowly.

"What was the spell supposed to do?" D slowly prompted.

"Request power from my ancestors to aid in my spell." Paul cautiously responded.

"Complete the request and the spell should be ended." D said simply.

"Complete my request? How? I already asked. What more is there for me to do?" Paul asked anxiously.

"Receive your answer." D answered simply.

"How?"

"Ginh Zah? Can you get a message to Paul's father from here?" D asked seriously.

The little demon gave a quick sharp hiss in response.

"Would you please tell him that Paul's here and would like to ask for his help with a project?" D asked calmly and seriously.

Ginh Zah gave another quick hiss, then looked at Paul inquiringly.

"Go ahead." Paul said anxiously.

Without further bidding, Ginh Zah took flight and flew out the archway toward the nightmarish hellscape on the horizon.

"It's going to be okay." D said as he collected his son into a hug.

"Do you need for me to keep the magical flow going?" Mr. Bentley Brown asked from nearby, then quickly added, "I'm not complaining. I just don't want to keep going if it's pointless."

"From my understanding of what's going on, just as soon as Paul receives an answer from his biological father, all three of the spells to open the vinculum storage are going to open at once. All the elemental magic users will need to be at full power when that happens." D carefully explained.

"Thank you. I understand. I'll keep going." Mr. Bentley Brown said simply.

"I'm sorry if I wasn't very welcoming when you arrived. You're being a great help and we all appreciate it." D said quietly.

"I was due for a vacation and already had my plane tickets and everything when this came up. I might have been a tad bitter about

being unexpectedly called in on this job." Mr. Bentley Brown timidly admitted.

"Well, hopefully you'll get to have an even better vacation after going through all of this." D said with a smile.

"The funny thing is, I was going to go to Hawaii to, among other things, go sightseeing at the volcanoes. I have a feeling that the whole thing would be an empty experience after seeing this." Mr. Bentley Brown said as he looked out the archway at the expansive hellscape before them.

"I can't disagree with you there." D said with a smile, then turned suddenly when he noticed a movement in the distance.

* * * * *

"What do we do now?" Dex asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. Are you going to go and see your dad or what?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Father will do as he will. I would not be so presumptuous as to arrive at his home without invitation."

"Then, are you going to invite him to come here?" Dex asked curiously.

"It would be improper. It is not my place to establish contact with him." Reaper said slowly.

"How do you people get *anything* done? It's a wonder that you were ever born if you can't visit and can't ask him to visit... how did your parents ever even get together?" Zanner asked belligerently.

"My mother was a bit... unorthodox. She was one who would pursue her desire despite propriety or the lack thereof."

"Do you think that your dad liked that about her?" Dex asked curiously.

"I believe he did. It was one of her more endearing qualities." Reaper said with a slight smile.

"Then maybe your dad wouldn't be *too* mad if you were like your mom that way."

"Perhaps. Even so, he would be required to respond to the breach of protocol despite his own feelings in the matter." Reaper said regretfully.

"Your family is really fucked up." Zanner said sourly.

Dex looked at him with surprise at the obscenity.

"Well, it is." Zanner said in his defense.

* * * * *

"Something's coming." Filipe said in a warning tone.

"What was that?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Out there, I can see the magic. It's glowing... well, not *literally*, but in the same way that I can see inside of spells." Filipe explained with difficulty.

"What do you think it is?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he moved nearer to where Professor Everstone, Dr. Williams and Filipe had gathered to work on the Southseid barrier spell.

"So far as I know, nothing lives in the netherworld between realms." Dr. Williams said thoughtfully.

"That might suggest that whatever or whoever that is might be here as a result of our presence." Professor Everstone said cautiously.

Rhuru-wra bleated a warbling whine in the tone of a question.

"He wants to know what he should do if we have to fight." Agent Fastbeck translated.

"Hold on! You're not going to have to do that." Milo assured them, then quietly added, "I recognize the magic that's approaching. It's my father."

"Oh... Okay. Um, so he's coming here... because you're here?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"Yes. Just the same way that I can sense him, he can sense me here." Milo said quietly.

"Is there anything we should do... or not do around your dad?" G asked somewhat distantly, obviously keeping the majority of his focus on the magic of the spear.

"No. Dad's great. I know he'll love all of you. In fact, if I were going to guess, I'd bet that he's probably going to want one or two of you to go back with him when we have to leave. He just loves meeting new people." Milo said with a tender smile at the thought of his father.

"I guess that's good because he's here."

* * * * *

Paul turned suddenly to look outside as Xaphan, Frederick and Nomia went on alert.

"What is it?" D asked when he noticed their simultaneous reactions.

"Everyone... I don't know if you can feel it, but there's a really REALLY big concentration of infernal magic headed straight for us. If you have any kind of defenses you'd like to throw up, now would be a really good time to get them up and running." Paul said warily.

As D quickly worked a shielding spell for himself, he noticed that Paul's demons had arranged themselves in a row to protect him as well as Paul.

A booming laugh rattled the foundation of the stone pillar room as a sudden ball of flame erupted out of nothing.

Just as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone, leaving an incredibly handsome young man in its wake.

Before anyone could react, Ginh Zah flew into the room through the archway and came to rest on Paul's shoulder.

"Ginh Zah said that you needed my help... but before we get to that, come over here. Let me have a look at you." The man said warmly.

"Are you my father?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"From what Ginh Zah told me, there isn't any doubt. I hear that you take after me quite a bit."

"I... um, I'm doing a spell right now. I have to keep it going or it's going to cause problems." Paul stammered.

Paul's father laughed with delight, then said, "I know. I can see your magic at work. If you lose concentration you'll dislodge three pockets of space/time. Ginh Zah said that you were powerful, but juggling three space/time pockets would be a bit much, even for me."

"It's not just me, I'm taking part in the Assembly of the Magi..."

"Are you Balthasar?"

"Yes. How did you know?" Paul asked curiously.

"That's my boy! The Magi of Creation and Destruction, that's what any demon worth his salt should strive to be."

Paul was surprised to find that the praises from the man who claimed to be his father actually *did* mean something to him.

"Come here, I need to tell you something." The man said warmly.

"Yeah, um, before I do that, you should know that I have the ability to see spells like you do, and thanks to my brother, I've become accustomed to seeing through sorcery and illusions. I know what you're showing me isn't real.

"I can understand why you wouldn't want to, but before we go too far, I'd like to see what you really look like at least once, so I can better understand who you really are and where I come from."

"I understand. But before I do this, it's important for you to know that your mother never saw my true form. She only ever saw me this way."

"I doubt that I would have thought about that, but I'll keep it in mind."

"I hope you're not too disappointed." Paul's father said as he looked into his son's eyes for a long moment.

Paul gave a slight nod of assurance, then watched as his biological father began to slowly shrink.

It wasn't a dramatic change, but the difference was notable. The man was now about a head shorter than he had been. His cheeks seem to have become a bit fuller and his eyes appeared to be a bit larger.

All in all, the man now looked like a relatively normal twelve or thirteen year old boy. He *did* look a bit paler than was normal, his lips were a bit redder, his hair seemed to be slightly slicked down, but none of that was so dramatic that it looked in any way 'inhuman' or 'demonic', perhaps just a tiny bit odd.

"This is your 'true' form?" Paul asked cautiously.

"This is my waking form. I have a more traditional demonic form when I'm angry or performing strong magic."

"I guess I get that from you." Paul said as he gave the internal push to go back to his 'human' appearance.

"Come here." The boyish version of his father said as he opened his arms.

Paul moved forward and was pulled into an enthusiastic hug.

As they were hugging, Paul's father quietly said something into his ear very slowly and clearly.

"What's that?" Paul asked cautiously.

"My true name. I'm sure you understand how powerful it is to know that about me."

"Yeah. I'll be sure not to abuse it." Paul promised.

"I can feel the magic slipping away, and we still have to complete the job that you called me here for. Tell me about you. Tell me something about your life, before we lose the chance."

"If we only have a little time, I'll tell you about what's most important. Father, I'd like for you to meet my dad. His name is D."

"Is this some sort of honorary title, or was Beth able to move on with her life?" Paul's father asked curiously.

"Beth and I were married last year. We have a daughter together." D announced.

"Good for her. Our relationship put her in an unfortunate position. I'm glad to hear that she's doing well."

"For some reason I thought that a demon would be more bitter and resentful in a situation like this." D said frankly.

"I suppose it all depends on how you look at things. I mean, while I don't like the way that things turned out with Beth and all that I'm sure she had to go through, Paul is the result so I can't say that I regret the relationship."

D smiled at Paul, then said, "Yes. That makes perfect sense to me."

"Well then, since we seem to be 'of a mind' about things. What do you say we get to work getting everyone back to their proper realm?"

Paul looked from his father to his dad and couldn't help but smile at the feeling of utter contentment.

Chapter 50

"Um... I don't know if you've thought about this, but what is Mr. Hansen going to find when he gets back to the Vinculum chamber?" Filipe cautiously asked.

"Have you ever heard tales of an entire village that fell asleep following some catastrophic magical event?" Reaper asked slowly.

"Yeah. I've heard a few stories like that." Dex reluctantly admitted.

"Are you saying that Mr. Hansen and Mr. Couleigh are asleep?" Zanner asked anxiously.

"Frozen might be more accurate. Frozen in time that is." Reaper said slowly.

"Why?" Zanner asked seriously, willing to accept Reaper's assessment of the situation.

"When there's an unintentional breach of dimensions, the area typically freezes and remains frozen until someone can repair the dimensional instability that caused it."

"And you think that's what just happened?" Dex asked cautiously.

"To my knowledge, no one was *intending* to perform any extradimensional manipulations. A general summons for additional magic shouldn't have done anything like that."

"Does that mean that everyone could be frozen, waiting for a hundred years?" Zanner slowly asked.

"Waiting for true love's kiss?" Reaper suggested with an amused smile, then explained, "No. Probably not. Most likely either Milo or Paul is going to need to find a way to alter their spell in a way to allow it to complete, or dismantle the spell to the point that time unfreezes."

"But dismantling a spell this big and powerful could take... I don't even know how long. Months?" Zanner guessed.

"To dismantle it completely, yes. But to tear it down just enough to stop the freeze should be possible in a matter of weeks." Reaper said speculatively.

"Well, I guess if time's frozen, that'll only be a problem for us." Zanner reasoned.

"You misunderstand. Only those impacted by the spell who are inside the spell diagram will be frozen. The rest of the world will carry on, oblivious to our plight." Reaper said as he glanced at the psychedelic landscape outside the archway.

"So what can we do to help Milo and Paul fix this mess?" Dex asked cautiously.

Zanner smiled at his question and looked to Reaper expectantly.

"All that *I* can do is reiterate my request for my father's aid. Once he responds, that will be all that any of us can do until the spell on us is completed or broken." Reaper calmly explained.

"When you ask your dad, do you think he'll really come here?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"No. If he were so inclined, I am certain he would have arrived before now. He would have sensed it as soon as my magic entered his realm." Reaper said regretfully.

"Maybe he's busy and has to do stuff before he can go." Dex quietly offered.

"Yeah. Maybe you caught him when he was on the toilet or something like that."

There was a commotion as the cherubs scrambled back in fear.

"Such a suggestion might be considered blasphemy." Reaper slowly explained.

"Hey! I'm on your side here! I'm trying to make excuses for your dad so you don't have to automatically think the worst of him." Zanner said assertively.

"Oh!?... Is that what you were doing? Thank you... I think." Reaper said uncertainly.

Zanner laughed, then asked, "Do you think you're the only one who was ever disappointed in their dad and had to make excuses for him?"

"Is your father also... distant?" Reaper asked cautiously.

"Naw. As far as the luck of the draw goes, I came out with a pretty good one. I'm just sayin that it happens. If you can just kind of accept that and use it to appreciate the times when he isn't being a jerk... well, it *seemed* to let them have better relationships."

"Every century or so he will have cause to seek me out. When next I encounter him, I will try to keep what you have said in mind." Reaper said slowly.

"So you really don't think he's coming, do you?" Zanner asked quietly.

"Had he decided that it was a worthwhile endeavor, he would have arrived by now."

"Yeah. So what do you think we should do next?" Zanner carefully asked.

"Maintain our spells and be as prepared as possible for when the assembly is fulfilled."

"When will we know if your dad is going to share the family magic with you."

"I just now received his answer. I can draw upon his power when the time comes."

Zanner cautiously walked to Reaper and gently put an arm around him.

Reaper lowered one of his many arms around Zanner's shoulders and returned his hug.

Dex sadly smiled as he watched his friends silently comforting each other.

* * * * *

"Milo? Where's my boy!?" A surprisingly joyful elven man asked as he stepped through the archway.

"Hi Dad. It's good to see you." Milo said timidly.

"So what's with this summons for magical support? You've always been determined to do things on your own. Even as a small child, you were so stubborn. You'd always insist on doing everything yourself." The elf asked as he pulled his son into a firm hug.

"Thanks for coming. The magical support call was part of the Assembly of the Magi spell. It wasn't really meant to summon you in person, it was just supposed to request whatever magic you or our family can provide to support me through this important casting that I'm going to be doing." Milo explained.

"*You've* been chosen for an Assembly of the Magi? That's so great! Assemblies only occur once every few generations. What an incredible honor! I'm so proud of you!" The elf exclaimed, then pulled Milo into another hug.

"No wonder Milo's so quiet." Filipe muttered to Dr. Williams at his side.

"Who is this we have here?" Milo's father suddenly asked as he released his son. "Why don't you introduce me to all your friends?"

Milo looked supremely uncomfortable, but dutifully carried on and said, "Everyone, this is my father, Jhaartael. Dad, I would like for you to meet Professor Everstone, Dr. Williams and Filipe. They will be making use of the magic that I will be releasing."

"A pleasure to meet you. Thank you for helping my son." Jhaartael said as he shook their hands.

"The boy with the spear is named G, he's going to be providing the raw elemental magic to fuel the spell." Milo said, in an obvious effort to keep things moving along.

"I'd never expect one as young as you to be able to hold an artifact of pure elemental power. What a wondrous world, so full of potential." Jhaartael said joyfully.

"Over here we have Rhuru-wra, a novice magic user of the Wudewas people and Agent Fastbeck from the FBI." Milo said timidly.

"I bet there's some kind of crazy story behind that." Jhaartael said with a laugh, then shook their hands as he said more formally, "It's wonderful to meet you both! It's so good to see Milo opening up to being around a more varied circle of friends. While I appreciate all that the druids have done for him, I've worried that he's been hiding himself away from the world."

"Dad!" Milo said in a scandalized voice.

"It doesn't even occur to him that I've already lived a lifetime and that in all that time I might have learned one or two things about how the world works. No. He wants to tread back over that same ground and make the same mistakes that I did, rather than listen to me and carry on from this point forward." Jhaartael said frankly.

"I *can't* learn from your mistakes. You lived your life and faced the consequences. Now it's time for me to do the same with mine." Milo said firmly.

"Of course! Live your life as you see fit. I'm just saying that I've been worried about some of your choices and that I approve of the new direction that you're taking."

Milo seemed to be frozen for a moment, then he quietly said, "I'm glad that you approve."

Jhaartael smiled, then looked curiously as a shadow moved to Milo's side and cautiously put a hand on his arm.

"Dad, this is Obby, another friend of mine." Milo said hesitantly, watching carefully for his father's reaction.

"When I told you that you needed to make new friends, I didn't mean..."

"Obby's not a shade. He's a fully formed shadow demon. If he's my friend it's because he wants to be, not because I commanded him."

"It was a joke. I wasn't accusing you of anything." Jhaartael said slowly, with a look of concern at his son's drastic reaction.

Milo unwillingly glanced back at his 'choir', who were dutifully standing aside, waiting to be called upon.

"Oh. It's like that, is it?" Jhaartael quietly asked.

"It gets lonely. I did what I had to do to get by." Milo said in his defense.

After a moment to consider, Jhaartael finally said, "That's good enough for me. If it got you here, to the point in your life where you've been found worthy of being chosen as a Magi, then you've made the decisions that are right for you."

"Okay, Dad. Thanks." Milo said timidly.

A hiss drew attention away from the father and son.

"This is Mah Zah. She wants you to know that she's an accomplished wizard in her own right and that she's available to help if she's needed." G said in a somewhat distant voice, obviously trying to maintain his consistent output of magic.

"Well, isn't that something!? We'll be sure to count you among the resources to draw upon." Jhaartael said to her warmly.

"Do we need to be doing something right now?" Filipe cautiously asked.

"Right you are." Jhaartael said firmly, then turned to Milo and said, "Son? You know better than I do about how all of this works. Take the lead and I will follow."

* * * * *

"Before we get too deeply entrenched in that, I was wondering if you might have a moment to help me with something..." D cautiously began.

"What might that be?"

"...you see, last year, at my wedding..." D reluctantly continued.

Paul audibly groaned at the memory.

D spared his son a sympathetic smile before continuing, "...the way it worked out, my ex-wife showed up and things became a bit... tempestuous."

"Emaline's your ex-wife?" The child-like demon asked with delight.

"Yes. Do you know what happened to her?" D asked hopefully.

"No. Not specifically. When Paul called for my help, of course I wanted to answer his call, but I couldn't, due to the banishment cast against me. So instead, I sent one of my most trusted associates to help out however he could. I was surprised, to say the least, when he returned with that raving harpy... wait. No. Harpies aren't really that bad... comparatively... You were really married to her?"

"She wasn't like that when we got married..." D began to say.

"Oh? So you're saying that you *made* her that way?"

"No! Not at all!" D quickly defended, then noticed that his son's biological father was half-convulsed with laughter.

D glared at him impatiently.

"Sorry. But you've got to realize that I'm a demon. It's in my nature to wind people up every so often."

"I suppose so." D reluctantly conceded.

"As to Emaline, it turned out that she had a spell or ward or something that made it possible for her to endure the demon realm or adapt to it somehow. For whatever reason, being in the demon realm didn't harm her so she decided to stay. Now she appears to be in a long-term relationship with a Chirago demon from Wrest-Skor, over by the border... Has him cowering like a whipped puppy from the way I hear it."

"What should I tell G about his mom?" Paul asked both men with concern.

"Nothing. If he mentions being worried about her, you could let him know that you have it on good authority that she's still alive. Beyond that, use your own judgement, but I wouldn't go out of my way to bring the subject up." D said thoughtfully.

"I'm just curious. Do you suppose that everyone at all three sites are waiting on us to make the next move to resolve this?" Miss Oaken asked the group uncertainly.

"Probably. Yeah." Paul immediately answered.

"Being that we're inhabiting a multidimensional space, it would be *possible* to tune this share of the space to continue to be part of the Meayithan Realm. That would allow me to continue to remain in this space with you without running afoul of Beth's banishment." Paul's father cautiously suggested.

"Would that be okay?" Paul asked D anxiously.

"No disrespect to your father, but I don't think that it's our place to invite an archdemon to join us." D told his son regretfully.

"Why not? With all the druids and bigfoots that we've already got helping us, why not invite Paul's father, too? Who knows? He might

end up being the one who tips the balance in our favor." Corabeth said frankly.

D looked around the group and cautiously asked, "Does anyone have a problem with inviting.... I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't throw it." The seemingly pubescent demon responded simply.

"People who don't work with demons a lot probably don't know about the power in a name. He's not being rude, he's just protecting himself." Paul quickly explained.

"Paul. Don't lose your concentration on the spell you're casting." Miss Oaken sternly warned.

"Don't worry, I got it." Paul assured his teacher, then continued toward D, "Since we can't use his real name, why don't you just call him 'V'?"

D smiled warmly at his son, then said, "We could certainly do that. I guess this means that you intend for him to be regarded as part of our family."

"He's my biological father. How much more a part of our family could he possibly be?" Paul asked assertively.

"Does anyone have a problem with V helping us? I need to hear about it now if you do." D asked sternly as he looked around the gathering, stopping on Agent Roberts.

"I don't recall any mention of *literal* demons in my FBI training so I don't think there's any 'professional' reason for me to object." Agent Roberts said simply, then with a smile he added, "On a personal level, V seems to be a lot more pleasant to be around than quite a few humans that I could name. I have no objection."

"Thank you, Agent..." V asked in such a way as to inquire his name.

"Agent Roberts, but I think I'd like it if you'd call me Shawn."

"Yes, of course. That's very kind of you." V said appreciatively.

"Anyone else?" D asked of the group.

"Going once...

"Going twice...

"Sold!

"We WILL be inviting V to stay and help us." D announced to the gathering.

"So what do we need to do to adjust the vinculum chamber to allow a demon to exist in our realm without being harmed by the nature energy?" Miss Oaken asked cautiously.

"If no one cares, I can fix the vinculum spell. It's just a simple adjustment to the multi-locational locus. Easy-peasy."

"You know, everytime he says that it ends up being a high level wizardry that I can't begin to comprehend." D quietly explained to the others around him.

"That's my boy." V said proudly.

"That's *our* boy." D said firmly.

"Yes. I suppose he is...I never even *considered* sharing him with anyone. Isn't that odd?"

"You DO realize that I'm STILL channeling water magic, don't you?" Mr. Bentley Brown demanded to know.

"Just as soon as Paul's ready to adjust the properties of this space, we'll be ready to get back to that." D assured him.

"I'm ready. I just need to make sure that everyone knows that when we snap back into our own dimension, the magic might kick in without warning." Paul said cautiously.

"What are we going to be doing?" V asked cautiously.

"Taking down a magical barrier and recasting it with improvements to make it more enduring." D said simply.

"You'll have to show me what to do, but I'll be willing to help however I can." V quietly offered.

"Thank you, V. That's very kind of you." D said gratefully.

"Yeah. Just don't spread it around. You could spoil my reputation."

"It's a deal."

* * * * *

"Do you want to... maybe send the cherubs to go and see what's going on?" Zanner asked quietly.

"No. Should the flow of magic suddenly start, I believe it would be better to have them here with us. It might have been a mistake to allow all the other witches to leave. I won't compound that mistake by sending the Cherubim away as well." Reaper slowly explained.

"What can we do until our time/space gets fixed?" Zanner asked cautiously from Reaper's side.

"I think the most productive thing might be to explain to the cherubim as much as you know about Mr. Hansen's plans for deconstructing and recreating the protectorate barrier." Reaper carefully explained.

"Is it going to cause a problem if the magic starts flowing and Den isn't here for you to target?" Dex asked thoughtfully.

"No. That is, not as long as I keep my head. Assuming that Linnaeus and Den stay together, I should be able to follow my bond to my demi-brother. Using him by proxy should allow me to target Den with little difficulty."

"Did you plan it that way before they left?" Zanner asked curiously.

"I considered the possibility that the magical flow might begin before they had the chance to return and decided that it would not be an insurmountable problem if that were to happen."

"So you didn't plan it, but you were prepared for it?" Zanner asked to confirm.

"Yes. That's a reasonable way of looking at it."

"And right now, just so that we can be prepared, you want for us to tell these guys as much as we know about what Mr. Hansen and Mr. Couleigh were planning to do?" Zanner asked to confirm.

"We don't know everything, but we'll do as much as we can." Dex promised for both of them.

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"Actually, there isn't much we can do until all three Magi have completed their spells and released the stored magic of the Vinculum. I've done as much as I can.

"The next thing we have to do is be ready if the magic is suddenly released. The Magi will have to immediately direct the flow of magic toward the bridges, in my case, that would be Rhuru-wra.

"Once that's done, then the witches and wizards will need to access the magic that the Wudewas are holding and put it to use, disassembling and recreating the barrier that protects the Southseid colony." Milo carefully explained.

"It's good to see you so passionate about something." Jhaartael said warmly.

"Dad! Pay attention! I need for you to be serious for once!" Milo said anxiously.

"I *am* serious. I'm just not stressing myself out about it. Keep in mind that I am the overseer of *five* separate dukedoms of faeries..."

"I thought it was four." Milo interrupted.

"Celeste decided that she wanted to take some time off and enjoy her twilight years. She didn't think that any of her children were worthy, so she asked me to take over the administration of the Mirrible Fae." Jhaartael explained.

"I'm surprised that Luna and Trance haven't tried to be named as the rightful heirs of succession." Milo said thoughtfully.

"I know. That just seems to prove Celeste's point. If they don't care enough about their land to fight for it, they don't deserve it." Jhaartael said seriously.

"We've gotten off track. If you can lend me the power of the *five* dukedoms long enough for me to access the magic stored in the vinculum chamber, then I can release it."

"Once that magic is released, what will you need for me to be doing?" Jhaartael asked professionally.

"I'm not sure." Milo began to say, then noticed his father's expression of pride seem to fall a bit.

"What I meant to say is that I can't predict where we're going to fall short of either power or control. I think it would be of most help to me if you could kind of monitor the status of how everyone is doing and jump in if you see that we're needing something." Milo quickly explained.

"Yes. I am of sufficient ability and power to be one of the more versatile members of the party. You're making good use of your assets." Jhaartael said thoughtfully.

Milo looked at his dad for a long moment, then quietly said, "I didn't mean to sound like I was scolding you. I'm just not used to being in charge of... anything. You're right. I'm stressing myself out, I just don't have your experience at keeping calm and knowing what to do."

"You're doing fine." Jhaartael said with a smile, then added, "And try to keep in mind that you aren't working without a net. If you need some help along the way, I'll see that you get it."

"Thanks, Dad." Milo said gratefully.

"But from the look of what I've seen so far, there's a very good chance that you won't need me." Jhaartael said frankly.

"Whether I need you or not, I'm glad that I'm going to be able to share this experience with you." Milo said with a smile.

"By the way, how is Klara doing these days?" Jhaartael asked casually.

"I don't know. I haven't heard from her in about four years." Milo said honestly.

"You know how your mom is, that probably means that she's fine." Jhaartael said simply.

"Or dead." Milo added seriously.

"Or dead." Jhaartael easily conceded with an unconcerned nod.

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts, would you go over and place your hand into the Brynnhollow door?"

"In some sense, they're ALL the Brynnhollow door, aren't they? Of course, by another way of thinking, none of them are now." Agent Roberts explained cautiously.

"I need for you to select one door for us to change the properties of. I just thought that the one that used to open to Brynnhollow would be the least likely to impact the other vinculum chambers." Paul patiently explained.

"Okay. I'll trust you to know what you're doing." Agent Roberts said as he walked to the archway and put his hand through.

"Hold it there for just another second... that's got it!" Paul finished with accomplishment.

A moment later, the scenery outside all but one of the archways changed from the nightmarish hellscape to the formal garden of Brynnhaven.

"How's that? Do you still have enough of a link to the infernal power of the Meayithan Realm?" Paul asked his father hopefully.

"Yes. That's fine." V said with a contented smile.

"So what do we have to do next?" Corabeth cautiously asked.

"You'd better get ready. I think shifting the vinculum back started a cascade. Here in a minute or two, everything might fall into place." Paul warned.

"What if it doesn't?" Corabeth asked cautiously.

"Then we'll give it a little kick." Paul answered simply.

D noticed the smile of pride that crossed V's face.

"Is there any reason to think that the other groups are having any difficulty with what just happened?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider all that he was sensing, Paul carefully said, "Nothing feels out of place. That's all I can tell you."

"What's happening now?" Miss Oaken asked hesitantly.

"The different incarnations of the vinculum chamber are floating back to their point of origin. As near as I can tell, once they fall back into place, the magic of the vinculum should release." Paul said slowly.

"Everyone, brace yourselves." D said firmly.

"Hold on, there's a magical force starting up. Does anyone else feel that?" Paul asked as he looked around.

"Yes. It feels like... danger... like the field outside the vinculum." Corabeth fought to explain.

"Right! See if you can tell where it's coming from, or maybe where it's absent." Paul said quickly.

"What do you think this is?" D asked cautiously.

"A warning. We just have to figure out if it's warning us to go near something or away from it." Paul reasoned.

"It's not as bad over here." Ares said from beside the doorway that Agent Roberts had just put his hand through.

"That makes sense. Everyone, go over by the door. I think the vinculum is about to recombine itself so that it can release its magic." Paul said as he, too, rushed across the room.

"Then why did it break apart in the first place?" Corabeth asked snapishly.

"Because the elements needed to be brought forth separately, but once the elemental flow has been established, the four different vinculum chambers become one so that the united magic can be released." Paul fought to explain.

"So that would mean that you could use the specialty of *any* magic." V said thoughtfully.

"Any except fire. There's no source for fire in the spell." Paul said simply.

"Why not? Why would they go through all of this and leave fire out?" Corabeth asked curiously.

"I think Agent Roberts said it best. Fire is the element of growth, movement and change. The people who set up these colonies didn't want them to grow or change. They wanted them to stay safe and protected... they still do. That's what we're doing here." Paul said seriously.

"What's that? Did you feel that?" V asked as he looked around for the source of the sensation.

"I think that's the Protectorate, another one of the barriers. It's fallen into place, or is in the process of it." Paul said slowly, then reminded everyone, "Be ready for the onslaught of magic. It could come crashing down on us any second now."

"What you did to the doorway, is that going to keep me from getting back to my family?" Ares asked anxiously.

"No. Agent Roberts should be able to toggle the destination when he opens the doorway for you. Just make sure you let him know if you want to go to Brynnhollow or to hell." Paul finished with a grin.

Ares flashed Paul an eyeroll as he tried to restrain a smile.

"I see that I don't have anything to teach you in *that* regard." V said with appreciation at his son.

"Don't worry about Paul. He's a *master* of sarcasm." D said warmly.

"It's in his blood." V said frankly.

"Hang on! Hang on! Here it comes!" Paul said in an increasing voice.

* * * * *

Between one moment and the next, the world seemed to completely change all around them.

Something about the room seemed to be wrong. It was like, just for a moment, all sense of direction had been lost.

The physical *structure* of the room had changed, although the dimensions remained the same. What had been stone columns or mossy pillars a moment before were now the wooden posts of the gazebo behind the Old Tennyson Place.

"What the hell..." Dr. Williams began to ask when he was suddenly overcome by the deluge of magic.

"Bridges! Remember your bridges!" Paul screamed at the top of his lungs as he tried to retain control.

"I don't know what needs to be done." V said as he looked around helplessly.

"Access the pool of magic through Ares and Dark, then help us to manage it." D ground out.

"Who?" V asked as he looked around at the thirty or so people who now filled the gazebo.

"The raven and the snake. They're holding the Brynnhollow reservoir of magic." D fought to explain.

"Simple enough." V said slowly, then his eyes went wide as he felt the drowning sensation of being overwhelmed with magic.

V's automatic reaction was to transform to his 'battle' form. He increased not only in height but his body weight also more than tripled.

His new appearance was certainly more in line of what someone would think of as a demon.

He appeared to be a few years older and had lost a certain amount of his 'cuteness'. When he looked over at Paul, he slightly smiled, seeing that he had also reverted to his more demonic form.

Both of them had hooves and horns. While Paul's skin appeared to be that of a human, V's skin was a bit rougher and redder, more in line with traditional demon physiology.

"Cast it out! Not welcome here!" A voice screeched.

"Make it leave!" Another called after it.

"I see that you've noticed the new addition to our group." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

Receiving no response, he continued, "Everyone, this is V, he's Paul's biological father. V, this is everyone."

"Give me a minute." V said gruffly with his much lower demonic voice.

"Sure. Take your time." Agent Roberts said as he watched carefully for what the Cherubim were doing.

"It cannot be here. This is sanctioned by 'The Sword'." One of the cherubs announced.

"The sword's not here and V is. That's all the argument that I have for you. If you don't like it, you can leave." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"No. They cannot." Reaper said firmly, then explained, "They have been commanded to attend me and are not free to leave until *I* release them."

Agent Roberts looked down at the obviously distressed cherubim and said, "Sucks to be you."

A sudden movement drew V's attention and he smiled as he saw Mah Zah and Ginh Zah reunite.

"Thanks for taking good care of G, Mah Zah." Paul was able to say.

"I'm glad they're being of help to you." V said sincerely as he kept the majority of his focus on influencing the flood of magic.

"Obby? How are you doing?" Agent Roberts asked as he noticed his shadow standing before him.

The shadow took one step forward, then wrapped him in a firm hug.

Agent Roberts smiled at the warm greeting, then realized that as they hugged, Obby had become insubstantial and reattached to him.

"It's good to have you back." Agent Roberts said warmly.

"Did you guys start without us?" Mr. Hansen asked as he led a group toward the gazebo.

"*In the days of tribute, in the months of seeing, in the years of trial, in the centuries of pain, we persevere. I humbly ask that you grant entry to one who serves. I am the keeper.*" Archdruid Highley called out as his group approached.

"We couldn't help ourselves. But we saved the best part for you. Are you guys ready?" Agent Fastbeck asked with concern.

"Den and Linnaeus could have done with a bit of warning, but I think we're doing as well as we can be under the circumstances." Archdruid Highley answered as he looked at his group with concern.

"Let's get them inside. I have a feeling that just as soon as all of them have acclimated to the level of magic that they'll be ready to get started.

Mr. Hansen, Mr. Couleigh, Den and Linnaeus were all more or less moving like zombies, going wherever the three gatekeepers steered them.

"Who's the new guy?" Archdruid Highley asked when the last of his charges were settled into place.

"Demon. Paul's father. Goes by V." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Any idea of what we need to do now?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he looked around at all the silent people struggling to gain control of the invisible power surrounding them.

"No. Not really. I guess we're just waiting on whatever's going to happen next." Agent Roberts answered honestly.

"You guys came back. I was worried that you weren't going to." Otis said as he stepped into the gazebo through the 'Waxell' archway.

"He doesn't have to say the words to open it." Agent Roberts said absently.

Agent Fastbeck shrugged, then said to Otis, "Everything's been building up to... something. I think it's about to happen."

"Do I have time to go get Kirwin? He went into the house to check on his grandfather. I know he wouldn't want to miss anything." Otis asked hopefully.

"Sure. But things are likely to get crazy around here. We're going to be trusting you to keep Kirwin and his grandfather safe. If things start getting dangerous, get them out of here."

"I will. I promise."

"Go on, then. It could start any second."

Chapter 51

"How badly do we actually need *their* help?" V asked as he glared disapprovingly at the cherubim.

"Due to the shortage of earth mages, they are actually *very* important to the job that we will be doing." Reaper stated firmly.

"You've got an entire realm to choose from, I don't see why you have to scrape the bottom of this *particular* barrel." V finished with disgust.

"Be nice. We're all here to do a job. Part of that means working with people that we normally wouldn't get along with." Paul told his father firmly, yet respectfully.

"Demon spawn speaks truth..." One of the cherubs began to say, but was silenced at Paul's quelling glance.

"I suggest you keep your comments to yourselves or the rest of us are going to have to put up with the distracting scent of fried chicken."

For a moment it seemed as though the cherubs were going to respond, but in the end, they appeared not to be ready to press their luck.

"That's my boy." V said proudly.

"Mine too." D said with a grin askance at him.

* * * * *

"I can feel them." Ares suddenly said.

"What? Who?" Dark asked as he seemed to wake from a dream.

"Cain, Deimos, Jazz, Olive... Carn... Mason... Rocky... it's like I can see their souls. It's so beautiful. It's incredible!"

"All I can see is you." Dark said quietly.

"I can see you too. You're almost there. You're so close. Just push past me, just a little bit and you'll be able to see everyone else."

"Okay. I see it now. Whoa! It's so much, all at once." Dark said as his breathing became heavier.

"I know. It's a lot to take in." Ares said calmly, "Just let it wash over you and through you. In a way, it's like it fades away and becomes nothing. At the same time, it's like it becomes everything, including you. Once you've entered it, you're part of everything... I don't know if that makes any sense."

"Yes. I'm getting it. And you're right, I can't describe it any better than that. Everything and nothing, all at once. That's *exactly* what I'm seeing... Go ahead, I'm ready. I'm with you." Dark finished confidently.

"Did you get what he was saying? That's what I'm feeling too." Den muttered to Linnaeus as he fought to focus on the congregation.

Linnaeus gave a barely audible grunt and a nod as he appeared to be in the same distant state as Den.

Rhuru-wra let out a triumphant roar which those present took to mean that he, too, had established contact with his people.

"Did we miss anything?" Otis asked as he entered the gazebo, gently carrying the frail elderly form of Steven Tennyson in his arms.

Right behind him was Kirwin, carrying Steven's walker.

"Nothing worth mentioning." Agent Roberts assured him.

"The real fun is just about to start." Agent Fastbeck added.

"You guys stay over by the Waxell door and you should be alright." Paul said distractedly from behind the row of demons, keeping vigilant watch for him.

"Steven, Kirwin and Otis, allow me to introduce Paul's father, his name is V." D said somewhat formally.

"Is he a demon?" Steven slowly asked.

Agent Fastbeck was impressed not only by Steven's assumption based only on the visual cues at hand, but also by the man's temerity to ask such a question directly.

"Yes. But please don't assume that you know what he's like because of that." D asked Steven urgently.

"Thank you, D. I appreciate that you don't automatically accept generalizations about demons as being true. When I last visited your realm, most people weren't quite so enlightened." V said appreciatively.

"Well, it just so happens that one of the people I love most in the world is part demon. That compels me to bypass lazy prejudices and judge the person for who he really is."

"Excuse me." Paul said firmly in his low demonic voice.

"Sorry Paul, I wasn't trying to embarrass you. I was just trying to explain..."

"That's fine. It's not that. The first stage of the magic has been released, the test stage." Paul said simply.

"The bridges have started structuring their support networks and the spellcasters have found their access points." Reaper said in a matching tone of voice.

"What you're being given has accumulated over a period of centuries. It represents *generations* of magic being harvested and stored as an inheritance. From now, you will be receiving the *real* magic. Put it to good use. Make it count." Milo said firmly.

"You *have been* warned." Paul said seriously.

"Here it comes." Reaper said in more of a cautioning tone.

Otis, Steven and Kirwin watched their new friends to see what was going to happen.

In unison, Zanner, Mr. Bentley Brown and G sat in their completely different sections of the gazebo. Dex obviously wasn't expecting the move, but slowly sat directly in front of Zanner, mirroring his position.

"Now." Paul said before tilting his head back and spreading his arms wide.

Just a moment behind Paul were Reaper and Milo, doing basically the same thing, except in Reaper's case, spreading his arms was a bit more of a production.

"Yessss." Ares said a moment later.

"I'm supposed to be the one hissing." Dark quietly muttered as a smile filled his expression.

"This feels so right.. for the first time in my life, I feel... complete." Ares fought to explain.

"I wonder if this is what it feels like to not be cursed?" Dark asked speculatively.

"I doubt it. No one can ever feel *this* good all the time. But whatever this is, I love it. I'm going to enjoy it for as long as I can." Ares said peacefully.

"I'm just glad that we're both here." Dark said as he moved slightly so that he could loosely drape his arms around Ares' shoulders. "If we can't have this *feeling* forever, at least we can hold on to the memory of sharing this experience."

Rhuru-wra let loose a joyous howl that confirmed that the witches weren't the only ones enjoying the new sensations.

Linnaeus quietly said something that most present couldn't understand.

"He said that he is happy to know, once in his life, what it feels like not to be an abomination. He feels important... necessary... He feels blessed." Agent Fastbeck fought to translate.

"The rest of us are honored to be able to join you as you experience this." Den told Linnaeus sincerely as he reached up and took firm hold of Linnaeus' hand.

"Magic users, spellcasters, witches, wizards, sorcerers, devils and angels. It is time to dispel the old barriers and remake them. I would like for each of you to state clearly for all to hear if there are any special conditions that need to be observed in regard to the barrier you will be working on. Say it now so that if we have the need to cross over into each other's spellcasting, we won't unintentionally destroy something important due to our ignorance." Professor Everstone announced to the gathering.

"The Brynnhollow barrier contains an embedded illusion. Unless you know something about illusions, you don't need to be messing with that part of the spell. We're going to leave it in place since we're going to need it for the new barrier." Miss Oaken said frankly.

"I know enough of how it works to help a little if you need me to." G offered.

"It looks like you're going to have your hands full, but if it comes to it, we're going to consider you 'Plan B'." Miss Oaken said firmly.

"Please be aware that I have enacted 'The Seven Spires of Earth' to access the pocket dimension where the Protectorate resides. Any spelling that negates the seven spires spell could theoretically dislodge the pocket dimension or destroy it completely." Mr. Hansen warned.

"Yeah. Let's not do that." Filipe said cautiously.

"Agreed." Professor Everstone said with an affectionate grin in the boy's direction.

"You should also keep in mind that the construction of the Protectorate is not only to keep beings out, but also to keep them 'in'. If you're going to be deconstructing or reconstructing, you'll need to keep that in mind." Agent Roberts said informatively.

"Yes. Friend-Shawn makes a necessary point." Reaper reluctantly agreed.

"What about the interconnection of the barriers? Are we going to have to do anything special because of that?" Filipe slowly asked.

"The interconnection aspects of all three colonies are included in the magic that is beyond the ability of witches to cast or control. It is a built in feature that we will have no choice but to accommodate." Professor Everstone firmly stated, then added more gently, "Please *do* keep that in mind."

"I'm not sure if this is something that you were expecting to happen, but if you'll excuse me, it appears that I have to change... right now." Agent Fastbeck barely finished saying before disappearing into his clothes.

"Yeah. Um, guys?! Is this right?" Agent Roberts asked as Obby stood beside him, looking like a darker, yet fully solid, version of Agent Roberts. It was as though Shawn's identical twin brother was standing beside him in particularly poor lighting.

A little hissing screech sounded from near Paul.

"Mah Zah thinks that the humans are getting magical overflow from anyone receiving magic from the bridges that cares for them." Paul said haltingly, obviously having the majority of his concentration focused elsewhere.

"How do we stop it?" Agent Roberts reluctantly asked.

"Why not just enjoy the moment and accept what 'is'?" Mr. Couleigh asked, sounding to be sincerely curious about it.

"That's... not really in my nature." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"Yeah. It's kind of an FBI thing." Agent Fastbeck agreed as he stood in his Oskmey form beside his clothing pooled on the floor.

"Does your explanation about humans and overflowing magic cover this?" Archdruid Highley asked in a trembling voice.

One by one, people turned to see what had befallen their comrades.

"Jarvis? Is there something you want to tell us?" Den asked his brother cautiously.

"I don't know how or why this happened." Archdruid Highley swore to his companions.

The white wings were nothing less than exactly what you would expect to see on an *actual* angel.

"I guess when you consider the magic held by the congregation and what's being held by the Nephilim, this *almost* makes sense." Den said slowly.

"If you think about it, something like this was bound to happen to him sooner or later. Humans who become involved with the supernatural seem to eventually get drawn into it until they finally reach a point where they can't be considered fully human any longer." Dr. Williams said sagely with what seemed to be a little extra touch of Jamaican thrown into his accent.

"Kirwin, think carefully about what you're seeing here right now. You're still at the point where you can walk away from all of this." Agent Roberts said sincerely.

"Do you regret what you are?" Steven asked on his grandson's behalf.

"No. Not for a minute." Agent Roberts said without hesitation, then added more slowly, "But what works for me may not be right for Kirwin. He's got his whole future ahead of him. I wouldn't want for him to make a decision now that might radically change the direction of his life."

"That's not something you have to worry about. Ask Grandpa, we're already part of this. We were *born* to be right here, right now." Kirwin said confidently.

"I don't know how many of you were *destined* to be here, but we ***were***." Steven emphatically confirmed.

"The same goes for you, Otis. You've got a chance to walk away before this becomes too big a part of your life." Agent Roberts said gently.

"I grew up in Waxell. Now that I've gotten a peek behind the curtain, there's no way that I could walk away from it, knowing what I know. I was born to this just as much as Steven and Kirwin." Otis said resignedly.

"Fair enough. I just have a feeling that this might be your last chance to walk..." Agent Roberts was saying when he was interrupted.

"I... like... you." Obby carefully said from Agent Roberts side.

"Oh! Um, I... like you too." Otis stammered with surprise.

Obby smiled broadly, then stepped forward to pull Otis into a firm, but gentle, kiss.

"Obby. I don't know if *right now* is the best time to be doing that." Agent Roberts said urgently, fairly certain that his shadow wasn't hearing him.

After a long moment of watching the men kissing, Steven quietly said, "He seems to be of a differing opinion."

"Obby! Let go of Otis!" Agent Roberts demanded.

A moment later, Obby slowly stopped the kiss, then looked over at Agent Roberts with a smile of lazy contentment and joy.

"Typically, people get to know each other and work up to the point where they have strong feelings that they want to eventually express physically." Agent Roberts tried to explain.

"Shawn, don't worry about it. He's fine." Otis said quietly, then looked into Obby's eyes as he started to smile.

"Fair enough." Agent Roberts said as he threw up his hands in a quiet surrender.

This time Otis initiated the kiss, but it was every bit as gentle and sweet as the one that Obby had started.

Agent Roberts watched them for a moment, then shook his head as he turned to walk away.

"Are you okay?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he moved to walk at Agent Roberts' side.

"Great. Except that I'm barely human anymore and my shadow's getting more action than I am." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"It'll be okay." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

Agent Roberts turned to ask him how he could be so sure, but then realized that Agent Fastbeck was still in his black Oskmey form. Not only was he fully aware of what Shawn was feeling, but he could also be reasonably sure that things *would* turn out for the best, considering what he had personally witnessed of magic.

"Okay. I hear you." Agent Roberts assured him.

"Agent Roberts, could you open the Brynnhollow doorway? I think Ares and Dark will be able to take their connections to the next level if they can interact with their loved ones." Paul asked hopefully.

"That won't cause any problems for V, will it?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously as he moved back to his doorway.

"No. The vinculum chamber itself is partially attuned to the Meayithan Realm, so there shouldn't be any issue with that. But if

you need to reopen the doorway for some reason, you can do so at any time." Paul easily explained.

"Rhuru-wra, we're going to begin taking down the Southseid barrier in just a moment. You can go and let your people know, if you would like." Professor Everstone said carefully.

"If your people need any help while the barrier is down, just let us know. The Brynns would be happy to help your people defend their homes." Ares offered sincerely.

Linnaeus let loose a screech that was punctuated by the fierce look in his eyes.

"He said that the Nephilim would love... absolutely LOVE to fight to defend your people." Den translated as he fought down a laugh.

"I bet they would." Agent Fastbeck said with a grin.

"*I call upon the powers-that-be to grant me entry to the sanctuary of the Brynns, I use the power granted by devils. I am the harbinger.*" Agent Roberts said with his hand hovering at the boundary of the archway.

The hellscape of the Meayithan Realm faded away and was immediately replaced by the elegant stonework and formal garden of Brynnhaven.

"Thanks Agent Roberts. We just need a minute to check on everyone and make sure that no one's having a problem." Ares said quickly.

"We're fine. Go do what you need to do. If I end up having to open the door to the Meayithan Realm for some reason, just give me a minute and I'll change it right back." Agent Roberts assured him.

"Thanks. I appreciate that." Ares said as he hurried through the archway.

"We'll be right back." Dark said reassuringly as he slithered closely behind.

* * * * *

The moments that followed were mostly silent, occasionally interrupted by one or another of those present quietly offering advice or support to those in close proximity to them.

"If anyone is having a problem, let us know so that we can get you help." Jhaartael said as he approached one of the groups of people.

"I think we've been able to balance the magic and establish the proper linkages" D said seriously, then asked more cautiously, "Have we met?"

"I don't believe so. My name is Jhaartael. I'm Miklos' father. I don't really have a specific duty to perform, so I'm going around to the different groups to see if anyone needs any help."

"I'm glad that someone thought to do that. My name is D and my sons are the demon over there and the one with the spear."

"Oh, I had naturally assumed that the demon child was the son of the adult demon." Jhaartel said cautiously.

"He is. It's a long story. V is Paul's father and I'm his step-father..." D said seriously.

"As far as I know, that's the whole story. It's not really all that long." V said with a grin as he joined them.

"I suppose it isn't." D said with a good-natured smile, then continued, "Jhaartael, may I present V. Hopefully you won't be too offended, but I think that Miss Oaken and Corabeth are at a point where they're going to need me to join them in casting the barrier spell." D said frankly.

"Yeah. I helped to manage the initial tsunami of magic with your air team, but now they need their specialists to do the actual spellcasting." V confided to the men.

"Yes. That's the same point that we've reached." D said simply.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" V asked quickly, before he could leave.

"Yes. Go with Jhaartael. I'm confident that he'll find someone in need of a little extra help." D said with certainty.

"Of course." V said as he watched D fall into his spellcasting with Miss Oaken and Corabeth, then turned to Jhaartael and said, "Although I'm quite powerful in my magic, my primary element is fire. I don't know how much use I'll be to you."

"My own magical specialty is aether, so it may turn out that we'll be keeping each other company while the others do all the work." Jhaartael said frankly.

"Well, I suppose that as long as our objectives are achieved we should be content." V said with a smile.

"Although my primary ability may not be of immediate use, I believe that I still have something to contribute both by way of 'natural' and 'basic' magical assistance."

"Well, if you need any help with lightning, I have an affinity for that too... although I can't see how that could be of any use in this situation." V said frankly.

"I arrived just before you did. It doesn't seem that there's any need at the moment, but I only have the most superficial understanding of what they're trying to accomplish." Jhaartael said honestly.

V looked around at all the different groups concentrating on all their different magics, then said, "Why don't we circulate and ask them what they need? It could turn out that our seemingly random and obscure talents might be of use to them."

"I suppose it's that much more likely that they'll find a use for us if we make the offer." Jhaartael agreed.

"But if the angels need anything, you should probably take care of it yourself... we don't get along." V quietly confided.

"Imagine that." Jhaartael chuckled.

V affected an expression of innocence that was worthy of any angel.

* * * * *

"The Brynnhollow barrier is down. Let Ares know when he gets back." Paul said distantly as he fought to keep his concentration on the magical flow.

"They're already back. They heard you." Agent Roberts assured him.

"Yeah. And I pity anyone who visits Brynnhollow uninvited today." Ares said with a laugh.

"The Protectorate barrier is down. Everything is going according to plan." Mr. Hansen announced.

"Expertly done. That was some elegant work." Mr. Couleigh said appreciatively.

"Thank you. I only hope that we can do the recasting as smoothly."

"I am confident that between us we have the skill and sufficient motivation." Mr. Couleigh said calmly.

"If that doesn't work out, I've got an ass-load of demonic magic that I can throw at it." V said as he stopped beside Mr. Hansen.

"I agree with Jerrell, I think we've got this. But thank you for the thought." Mr. Hansen said with a quick smile over his shoulder.

"Psychotic though it may be." Mr. Couleigh added with a grin.

"What is seen as psychotic in your realm is seen as normal in mine." V informed him simply.

"To be honest, it's kind of normal here too, depending on the company you keep." Mr. Couleigh admitted.

"V? Can you come over here for a minute?" D called from beside the Brynnhollow archway.

"Duty calls." V said with a grin before hurrying away.

"What does it say about me when I'm more trusting and comfortable with a *literal* demon than most of the people that I encounter in my daily life?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"Demons like V are not only the most powerful that you're likely to encounter, but also the most dangerous. They are fully capable of enthralling legions of people who would willingly... eagerly die at their command. I don't even know how much of it is magic and how much is their natural charisma." Mr. Couleigh quietly explained.

"Do you think we're safe?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"Yes. But only because we're allies of his son's. I honestly believe that if not for that, we wouldn't have even the slightest chance of standing against someone like him."

"Do you really think he's that powerful?"

"I sincerely hope that we never have cause to find out."

* * * * *

"That's it. The Southseid barrier is down." Professor Everstone said with accomplishment.

"How is everyone doing? Does anyone need help?" Jhaartael asked as he looked around at the different groups.

"Brynnhollow is doing fine. Of course, things might change when it's time to recast the barrier, but for now I think we're alright." D immediately answered.

"With the help of the Cherubim, work on the Protectorate is proceeding normally." Mr. Hanson announced.

"Have there been any problems with the dimensional pocket?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Not so far. We're keeping close watch on it." Mr. Couleigh assured him.

"Good. I don't know a lot about magic, but that sounds like something that could go really wrong, really fast." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Do you need me?" Obby quietly asked from his place with Otis, beside the Waxell door.

"No. You're fine where you are. I'll let you know if anything comes up." Agent Roberts assured him, then noticed the sudden strange look on both Obby and Otis' faces.

It took him a moment to realize what they were thinking.

"I'm not talking about boners. Just... relax. Okay?"

"Are you sure that you don't need us to be doing something to help? Otis asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

* * * * *

"We're ready to start recasting the Brynnhollow barrier." Corabeth announced into the mostly silent gazebo.

"The Protectorate will be ready in about two minutes." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

"Yes. Two minutes would be about right for Southseid as well." Professor Everstone said thoughtfully.

"Is there anything that we need to do before the major spellcasting begins?" Agent Fastbeck asked seriously.

"I have one thing." G said, then made a gesture toward the Brynnhollow doorway.

In a flash, a duplicate of G appeared beside his father.

"I didn't take into account my expanded abilities while channeling this much magic. This way, if you run into any problems with the illusion part of the spell, Lex might be able to help you." G explained by way of Lex. His *actual* body seemed to be lost in concentration.

"Hopefully we won't have any issues in that regard, but I'm glad that you were able to develop a contingency plan that makes sense. Good work." D said to his son.

"Thanks, Dad." Lex and G responded simultaneously.

"What say the Protectorate team? Are there any last minute preparations that need to be made?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he looked in that direction.

"I would like to take this opportunity to engage in a prayer..." Archdruid Highley began to say.

"Knock yourself out." Agent Fastbeck forcefully interrupted, then turned to Professor Everstone and asked, "Any last minute preparations?"

"No. I believe that we have all that we will need in regard to planning as well as personnel."

"Otis, Steven and Kirwin, if things get too intense, just step through the doorway and you should be safe. You won't be helping anyone if you're injured and we might even have to stop our spellcasting to help you." Agent Fastbeck said firmly.

"We understand the risk." Steven said for the group.

"Does ANYONE have ANYTHING to cover before we dig into the nitty-gritty spellcasting?" Professor Everstone cautiously asked.

"Is there anything special that the gatekeepers need to be doing?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"Stand by and wait to be called upon. Although there is no specific reference as to your participation in the spells, there is no doubt that your presence is required." Professor Everstone said firmly.

"Okay. That's pretty much what I thought but I wanted to be sure that I wasn't missing something." Agent Roberts explained.

"If there isn't anything else, let us begin." Professor Everstone announced.to the group.

* * * * *

There was a long silent moment as everyone waited to see if there were going to be something more, then everyone seemed to spring into action, all at once.

The 'Protectorate' group seemed to take the most decisive action as they started planning all the steps and stages involved in recasting the barrier. While there was no doubt that Mr. Hansen was leading the effort, Mr. Couleigh and the cherubs were keeping up with him, step by step, contributing their ideas and encouragement to the group effort and moving it in a productive direction.

The 'Southseid' group seemed to take a different approach. Professor Everstone very articulately and professionally presented the bullet points of their plan, then went back and expounded on each point in turn, encouraging the others to ask questions or ask for clarifications as needed.

"The 'Brynnhollow' group took an extra moment to see what the others were doing before resolutely going to work. Miss Oaken, Corabeth and D had discussed and planned their actions to the point that they almost seemed to be 'of a mind' as they started casting the spell. They didn't have to interrupt their spellcasting with stage directions, only the slightest glance was necessary to prompt each of them into performing their next step in the spellcasting.

"I don't think they're going to need us." V told Jhaartael frankly.

"Of course they don't, not at this early stage of things. Wait until they get into their second or third hour, that's when the strong begin to show their true worth."

"I suppose that's true. I normally don't have the patience for such things, but I could stand here all day and watch my son achieving everything that I could have hoped for him." V said warmly.

Jhaartael laughed sympathetically, then said, "It's exactly the same for me. Although I've never once explicitly *said* that I was disappointed in Milo, seeing as he's never achieved *anything*, well... it's always been there, hanging in the air between us."

"I'm glad he's had the chance to make you proud. I've never played any role in my son's life... I should restate that. I provided for certain... contingencies. I put things in place in the event that they might someday be of use to him. But it wasn't until my son's presence and power penetrated my realm of influence and called upon my help that I could be sure that he had even inherited anything from me. He could have been a witch like his mother or even completely powerless." V explained.

"If he had been powerless, would you love him any less?" Jhaartael asked curiously.

V considered for a moment, then slowly said, "If he were the person that he is now, I don't think so. He has a clear mind and strong will... I like to think he inherited some of that from me. As long as he made good use of whatever skills he had and challenged his limitations, I think that I would love him and be just as proud of him."

"Yes. I think that's what frustrated me so much with Milo, the waste of potential. I knew that he had it within him to be great, but he was hiding himself away, acting like a mundane human, pretending to believe in their convoluted mythologies." Jhaartael said with frustration.

"But now he's here, one of the three Magi, casting a spell more complex and powerful than most magical beings will witness in a lifetime." V reminded him.

"Yes. I suppose that he and I are going to have to come up with a new relationship dynamic. Me being superior and looking down on him won't be realistic after he's done this." Jhaartael said thoughtfully.

"Paul and I don't have a dynamic. We're strangers." V said distantly, then slowly added, "I love him, and I believe that he loves me. But we literally know *nothing* about each other."

"I wonder which of us is worse off in that regard." Jhaartael said speculatively.

V looked at him inquisitively.

"Are you better off having to get to know him with no preconceived notions or am I better off, having the history with my son, but also having to adapt to suddenly having to... show him respect." Jhaartael said uncomfortably.

"I think it's safe to say that each of us has our own minefield to walk. I suppose it's just good that we'll each have a sympathetic ear nearby in case things don't end up working out as well as we had hoped." V said frankly.

"Yes. It might also be of benefit to have someone in a similar situation should we need to 'brainstorm' about an unexpected development."

"I am *excellent* at brainstorming. Rest assured that you can count on me." V promised.

"For some reason, and I'm not quite sure what it is, I was certain that I could."

Chapter 52

"How is everyone doing?" G asked as he looked around the dreamscape.

"Did you call us, Mr. Bentley Brown? Can we just call you by your first name? If there was an emergency, everything would be all exploded before we were finished calling your name."

"My first name is Charles."

"Charles... Charlie? Brown?" Zanner slowly puzzled.

"Bentley Brown, if you don't mind too terribly."

"Your parents must have been real sadists to do that to a kid." Zanner said frankly.

"To the contrary, my parents were quite joyful and thought the whole thing was tremendous fun." Mr. Bentley Brown said with the ultimate flat affectation in his voice.

"Well, I guess as long as you're not bitter about it..." G said hesitantly.

"If we may continue." Mr. Bentley Brown said firmly.

Zanner glanced at G, obviously fighting the urge to say something inappropriate.

G couldn't help but smile in response, then dutifully returned his attention to Mr. Bentley Brown.

"Why did you bring us here? What do we need to do next?" Dex asked seriously.

"I did not call this meeting. The chalice did that of its own accord." Mr. Bentley Brown patiently explained.

"So, what are we doing here?" G asked cautiously.

"The way you explained it before, I thought this place is where we can compare notes and make plans. Maybe we're here to do that." Dex reluctantly suggested.

"As far as I know, we're all doing fine... aren't we?" Zanner asked as he looked from one person to the next.

"It would seem so. As far as I know, we are all proceeding without issue. I am not aware of anything that we need to discuss." Mr. Bentley Brown cautiously stated.

"So *this* is where you guys are hiding." Paul's voice said, heralding his arrival.

"Paul? How did you get in here?" G asked hesitantly as Paul materialized before them.

"What? Aren't you happy to see me?" Paul asked in a mock-wounded tone.

"Yeah. Happy. Love you always." G rattled off casually, then urgently asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I didn't choose to be here. I was kinda brought." Paul said simply.

"Mr. Bentley Brown? Do you have any idea why Paul is here?" Zanner asked hopefully.

"I can't be sure, but it is *possible* that since Paul previously held the chalice, that he is seen as a worthy holder of it. If the chalice can sense his physical presence and still sees him as being worthy, it might have reached out to include him in the meeting." Mr. Bentley Brown said speculatively.

"Is this a dreamspace?" Paul asked curiously as he looked around.

"Yes. And we're also outside of time... well, mostly. We can be in here for hours and it's a few seconds outside." G explained.

"Does sorcery not work here?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I don't know, I haven't tried. Why?"

"No reason. I just thought that a dreamspace would be a playground for a sorcerer like you." Paul said frankly.

"We've been more focused on accessing the power for the Magi." G said frankly.

"We're giving everything we've got and I'm not sure it's going to be enough." Zanner admitted.

"Don't worry. As one of the Magi, I can promise you that no matter what happens, we won't take more than you have to give."

"From the way things have been... *unfolding* so far, I can't help but think that there's got to be a reason you were brought here..." G fought to explain.

"Plenty of things happen without a reason, but for right now, let's look at what we've got to work with and decide what we're going to do with it." Paul said confidently.

"Isn't it obvious?" Zanner asked the group impatiently.

After a moment, G finally said, "Apparently not, because you seem to be the only one to figure whatever it is out."

"You and Paul combine your magic. That's the obvious thing about him being here. There must be something that you can accomplish together that no one else can do on their own." Zanner said frankly.

"Cooperative spells take a lot of hard work and preparation..." G began to explain.

"Except for with me. Since I can do multiple spells at once, it gives me a special talent for weaving spells together." Paul said thoughtfully.

"So what cooperative spells do you guys have that could help us out?" Zanner asked curiously.

"The pillar and the ice house are about all that we've got." G reluctantly admitted.

"Yeah. When we're alone together, we usually have other things on our minds." Paul said with a suggestive grin at G.

"Right. Um, then what does that leave us with?" Dex asked cautiously.

"Not much." G admitted frankly.

"What if..." Paul began to say, but drifted off in thought.

"What if what?" G cautiously asked.

"Give me a second to work this out... I think I've got something but it may be too big for me to do by myself." Paul muttered distantly.

"Which *could* be why the chalice brought you here." Zanner said frankly.

"What have you got? Maybe we can help you reason it out." G quietly offered.

"I don't know if we can find a way to do it, but what if we weave the spells of all three barriers together somehow? The woven spells could exponentially increase their strength and durability. Not only would you have triple *layered* spells, but then you'd have the stress dispersion dynamic from the weave." Paul said slowly.

"That sounds great except that there's no way to do it. Getting *all* the spellcasters to coordinate that many spells would be straight up impossible." G said honestly.

"That's true, but look at who we've got here. It's *none* of the regular spellcasters. What if that means that there's something that *we* can do." Paul patiently explained.

"We're the people summoning magic and directing it to do what we need it to." Zanner said frankly.

"So, what if the direction that we choose is some kind of a 'weave'?" Dex cautiously suggested, then looked around nervously to see if anyone were going to call him stupid.

"So are you saying that instead of erecting one barrier at each colony, we'd be erecting three?" Zanner asked slowly.

"In a way, but it's more like we'd be interlacing the temporal/spatial loci of the three barriers... it's actually kinda multidimensional..." Paul muttered thoughtfully.

"The Vinculum!" Dex interrupted.

"What about it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"It's a multidimensional space that exists at the center of all three colonies. If we were to anchor our spelling to the Vinculum and project it outward from there, then we could place and 'weave' the spells one time and have it done for everyone." Dex said speculatively, appearing to be fairly certain of his deduction.

"What about Waxell? Isn't doing it that way going to draw it into the spell?" Zanner asked anxiously.

"It could." Mr. Bentley Brown said simply, then added, "A balancing force needs to be generated to negate the barrier generation at the Tennyson property."

"But wouldn't the 'balancing force' have to be huge to stand against all the other spellcasters at once?"

"No..." Mr. Bentley Brown began to say just as Paul said, "Not really. Much like water, magic will follow the path of least resistance. If the three of you can clear the way for the other elements, my father can protect the human realm."

"Your father?" Zanner asked suspiciously.

"Yeah. He's got the fire element and he's powerful enough to manage it on his own." Paul said simply.

"How likely is it that this is some sort of plan dreamed up by your father to cause you to set him loose in the earthly realm?" Mr. Bentley Brown asked seriously.

G and Zanner both bristled at the suggestion, but Paul immediately said, "That's a fair question."

After a moment to allow that to sink in, Paul continued, "But if we're going to use the triple barriers, we're going to need his help. There's no debate on that point, we don't have anyone with fire abilities who could even come close to being strong enough. We need to decide if that's a deal-breaker before we can do much of anything else."

"I think how *you* feel about it is going to matter a whole lot more than whatever the rest of us think." G quietly admitted.

"Don't worry about me. I'll deal. Just do what's right. Help the most people you can." Paul said frankly.

"Is it worth the risk?" Dex cautiously asked.

"I think the better question might be 'can we really think about passing this up?'" Zanner asked assertively.

"What do you mean?" Paul asked curiously.

"We're being given access to epic amounts of magic to help *three* colonies of defenseless people with a shielding spell that's so big and powerful that not only has it never been cast before, but will probably never be cast again. If we fail, we're really no worse off than if we'd done nothing. But if we succeed..." Zanner trailed off expectantly.

"But what if it's a trap?" G asked simply.

"If we make a mess, we'll clean it up." Paul responded in kind.

"Does anyone have a problem with this arrangement? We need to be clear on this before we commit to an action." Mr. Bentley Brown asked seriously.

"I think we're all fine." Zanner quickly assured him, then quickly asked, "What about you?"

"Disregarding any *feelings* on the matter, I think this is a logical way to proceed." Mr. Bentley Brown said very precisely.

"What if you didn't disregard feelings?" G pressed.

"My illogical *flawed* feelings tell me to trust V. I get the sense that if your father believes that our goals are worthy, that he will fight passionately... even *righteously*, to achieve them."

"I know that's supposed to be good... Why does it sound like it's a bad thing?" Paul cautiously asked.

"Perhaps because the greatest atrocities in history started out with someone like your father." Mr. Bentley Brown said soberly.

"What do you think we should do?" Paul hesitantly asked.

"Make a choice and commit to it. We don't have time to waffle on the issue."

"Actually, we do. You know, dreamspace... outside of time... remember that?" Zanner asked impishly.

"Yes. I remember." Mr. Bentley Brown assured him, then explained, "But I doubt that a month of discussion will allay all of our concerns. We need to decide what we, as a group, believe is right or wrong, then make our decisions accordingly."

"Does anyone want to give up this chance because Paul's father is a demon?" Dex asked as he looked around their small gathering.

"There's a lot more to it than that..." Paul began to say.

"No. I really don't think that there is." Mr. Bentley Brown interrupted. "If *anyone* here believes that including V and doing the *'weave'* are too dangerous or in any way the *wrong* thing to do, then you need to make it known *right now*. This will only work if we're *all* committed to the project."

"I think it goes without saying that I'm on board." Paul said simply.

"Would you hate me if I didn't trust your father enough to go through with this?" G asked cautiously.

"I won't hate you, I'll be proud of you for speaking up. I only ever want for you to do what you believe is right." Paul reassured him.

"Okay. Then I have no objection to trusting V." G said simply.

"Oh... Good... Um, how does that work?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I think that if this were some kind of plot, then you'd be trying to convince me to go along with you. Since you're encouraging me to make up my own mind, I think you're right. We've got one chance to do something amazing. Let's take it."

"Does anyone else have anything?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I have no idea of what we're actually going to do, but I'm with you in wanting to do it." Zanner said frankly.

"We're just going to redirect the spells that everyone was already going to cast." Paul said dismissively.

"Just as simple as that? Huh?" G asked with a smile.

"Easy peasey." Paul said with a grin.

G couldn't restrain a laugh.

"Once you work the new destination into your base spell, it will allow the barriers to be redirected and woven together." Paul continued.

"Who's going to be doing the weaving?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"The Magi. It's like each group of spellcasters is creating their own unique 'strand'. The Magi are going to weave those strands together."

"Then why aren't the Magi here, figuring this out?" Zanner asked curiously.

"Probably because the hard part of this is deciding what to do. Once that part is settled, then all that's left is to go ahead and do it."

"Okay. I'll take your word for that. But now that we've decided, what is there for *us* to do?" G asked carefully.

"Oh, I thought you already figured that part out. The relic holders are going to be fueling *all* of the weaving while the magic users are using the *stored* magic to create the barriers. Having the uniquely sourced magics is part of what's going to make all of this possible."

"I don't know about anyone else, but I'm already putting out one hundred percent. I don't think it's possible for me to do more." Zanner said frankly.

"All we're going to need is a path to follow, just the slightest thread. Once we've got that, we can manipulate the flow so that you won't have to worry about us overwhelming you or taking too much."

"But you're going to be using the magic from the relics to do the weaving?"

"Yes. That's what's going to allow us to do our own unique spellings while the spellcasters are still doing theirs. Otherwise our spells might become muddled." Paul said confidently.

"Okay. So what do we still need to do before we go back to normal space/time?" Zanner asked cautiously.

"Just back me up when the time comes. I'm not sure that Reaper and Milo are going to be too enthusiastic about switching tactics at this point in the project." Paul said frankly.

"You can count on us." G warmly assured him.

"Thanks. I appreciate that." Paul said with a smile, then looked around uncertainly.

"Are we supposed to do something to make it stop?" Dex quietly asked.

"So far as I know, the chalice should release us once everything has been resolved." Mr. Bentley Brown said honestly.

"Maybe it's still evaluating what we just did and needs a minute to catch up." Zanner suggested helpfully.

Paul nodded, then smiled as he looked to G and said, "It was really cool the way Dad reacted to Lex."

"Yeah. I know that I don't do as many amazing things as you do, but I think it makes it that much more awesome when Dad notices something that I did." G said with a wistful smile.

"I think it also helps that Dad doesn't go around praising us for every little thing. When he says that he's impressed by something, you know that he means it." Paul said frankly.

"Everyone, I just felt a magical pulse from the chalice which I believe is the signal that we will be returning to the physical plane any moment. Brace yourselves and don't be jarred by the sensation of rushing power. Your bodies have been channeling the elemental magic the whole time we've been here." Mr. Bentley Brown explained.

"I love you." Paul said with a quick smile.

"I love you too." G responded before the world went white.

* * * * *

"Reaper. Milo. I need you for a second." Paul said as the world seemed to reform from the white nothingness.

"Everything is in readiness. We cannot delay." Reaper said in a warning tone.

"Look over here." Paul said simply as he pointed to the floor in the center of the gazebo.

As soon as he said the words, a large stone pillar began to form and rise up.

When the pillar reached the level of a table, it stopped growing and the surface began to glow with an intricate spell diagram.

"What are you doing?" Milo asked as he cautiously approached.

"Like Reaper said, we cannot delay." Paul said as the last of the details of the diagram filled themselves in.

"This... You propose casting a spell using *active* spells, as they are being cast, as components?" Reaper asked in astonishment.

"Sounds kinda ballsy when you put it that way." Paul said frankly, then continued, "But if you guys are up to it, the three of us can weave the barrier spells together. The spellcasters won't have to do anything but give the Magi control of the locus."

"What about Waxell?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Oh yeah. If my father is up to it, he could use his fire as an opposing force to keep a barrier from forming there." Paul said as he glanced at V hopefully.

"Of course I'll be glad to help however I can." V immediately stated.

"If you'll just hang out with Otis and Kirwin over by the Waxell door, you shouldn't have to do much more than repel the flow of magic in your direction..." Paul was saying when a strange look crossed his expression.

He paused for a moment, then turned half around and cautiously asked, "Ares?"

"Yes?" Ares immediately responded.

"Do you know if Deimos and Jim are nearby?"

"Yes. As far as I know, they're in the clearing just about thirty feet from here." Ares cautiously answered.

"Would you ask them to come here?" Paul asked absently, as he seemed to be working through about a hundred different scenarios at once.

"This isn't going to be dangerous, is it?" Ares cautiously asked.

"They shouldn't be in any more danger in here than out there." Paul said frankly.

"That doesn't make me feel much better." Ares said with a slight grimace.

"I get the feeling that making you feel better is *his* job." Paul said with a grin in Dark's direction.

Dark laughed and nodded at the statement.

"I'll just go... get them." Ares said as he shyly ducked out of the room.

Paul smiled, then turned to his right and said, "Xaphan, I'd like for you to stand with my father and lend him aid with your fire. Will you do that?"

Xaphan growled once in response, then walked immediately to V's side.

"What did you need us for?" Deimos, in his half-dragon form, asked as he hurried into the Vinculum chamber, preceding the centaur, Jim, by only a step.

"I was hoping that you guys could help us out with a spell that we're doing." Paul explained.

"We don't know how to do anything but fireballs." Deimos explained.

"I'm not expecting you to do anything more than that. The important thing is that there are fire users present to resist the formation of a barrier around Waxell." Paul said seriously.

"I understand what he's saying. I'll help you." V offered.

The half-dragon and centaur stared up at the *literal* demon with surprise.

"This is my father, we call him V." Paul finished with a smile up at his father.

"*We're* going to get to work with a *real* demon?" Deimos asked excitedly.

Jim was dancing with his front hooves slightly with excitement at the prospect.

"I get the feeling that they're not going to have a problem with it." V said with an amused smile at his son.

"Bad." Jael said disapprovingly.

"Is bad." Zarall agreed.

"The celestial is countered by the infernal, such is the natural order." Reaper said mostly patiently.

"So you want for us to follow this spell diagram while reforming the barriers?" Milo asked thoughtfully, apparently oblivious to all that was going on around him.

"Yeah. If the spellcasters will yield the locus to the Magi, that should be the only difference on their parts. As far as our part, just follow the pattern that I've made here." Paul said seriously.

"This design... is it Celtic in origin?" Milo asked uncertainly.

"I don't know. I guess so." Paul said haltingly, then broke into a smile and added, "I'm part Scottish, on D's side of the family."

"You *do* realize that we're still channeling the elements, don't you?" Mr. Bentley Brown quietly interjected.

"Sorry Charlie... erm, Mr. Bentley Brown." G finished with a smile.

"We'll get on with it right now." Paul gently added, then said more loudly, "Magic users, in case you weren't able to keep track, there's been a slight change in plans. When it comes time to define the locus of your spell, call upon your Magi to state it. That's the only change you'll have to take into account."

"Do you need me over here?" V asked his son cautiously as he indicated the Waxell door.

"Yes. Just resist the formation of a barrier around your vinculum point. That should be all you'll have to do." Paul assured him.

"Maybe you could show us some fire tricks... I mean, if you have time." Deimos cautiously suggested.

"Are you saying that you have natural born fire magic and you don't know any spells?" V asked curiously.

"Paul taught us fireballs, but that's all the fire we know." Deimos answered.

"Come over here and I'll see if I can't find a few more spells for you." V said warmly, then glanced back at Xaphan and said, "You too. Maybe you know of a spell that the boys haven't learned yet."

* * * * *

"Do you want for me to upgrade the illusion?" Lex asked cautiously.

Corabeth and Miss Oaken looked from Lex toward G, trying to understand who was talking to them.

"With the magic that we have access to, it would be possible to upgrade the Brynnhollow illusion a little." Lex elaborated.

"Like how?" Corabeth cautiously asked.

"I can just adapt the existing spell to have an outer layer showing the person what they *expect* to see. That way, someone could enter the Brynnhollow woodlands and not even realize that they were ever near a magical barrier. They would have to push past the misdirection before running into the disorienting creepy part of the spell." Lex explained.

"Can you really do that? I mean... you're not a real person..." Miss Oaken uneasily reminded him.

"I'm an illusion cast by a sorcerer who has tapped directly into one of the primary elements. I probably have more magic available to me than the average witch." Lex said frankly.

"Are you G or are you someone else?" Corabeth asked uncertainly.

"I'm me... G calls me Lex." He answered.

"Will you still exist when this spell is over?" Miss Oaken gently asked.

"I hope so." Lex answered simply, then timidly smiled at Corabeth as he continued, "There are some people that I'd really like to get to know better."

Corabeth blushed and timidly smiled at the statement.

"But right now G is depending on me to do what he isn't able to. Would you like for me to upgrade the sorcery on the Brynnhollow barrier?"

"How is that going to affect the other barriers, I mean, with the way they're talking about weaving them together?"

"Unless I'm missing something, all the changes should be for the better. It will take what's already there and give it a fresh veneer of 'nothing to see here, move along'." Lex said seriously.

"Do you need for us to do anything?" Miss Oaken asked uncertainly.

"Just kinda hang back for a minute while I do my stuff." Lex said simply.

"You're not *real*. How can you cast a spell?" Miss Oaken asked suspiciously.

"A puppet master like you should know better than anyone. Remote possession, casting by proxy... the only difference is that instead of using a doll or a possessed person, G is using an illusion of himself." Lex carefully explained.

"What do you know about me?" Miss Oaken asked uneasily.

"Just what G knows. It's nothing bad. The students are all interested in what abilities the teachers have. He heard about your remote possession ability from Paul when you took Carla to the office that time." Lex said frankly.

"I've learned not to tell people about my ability. Not many understand what it actually is and some are afraid that I might somehow control them." Miss Oaken said quietly.

"You don't have to worry about that with G. His dad has a similar ability, so he's been around that kind of magic all his life." Lex finished with a smile.

"If D is 'his dad', what is he to you?" Corabeth asked with concern.

"I don't know. He's sort of like my dad too, but in another way he's not, since he doesn't see me as his son. I guess I'll have to think about that... if I continue to exist, that is." Lex finished uneasily.

"Okay. If you're going to modify the illusion spell, now is the time to do it." Miss Oaken reluctantly interrupted.

"This won't take too long." Lex assured her, then turned to Corabeth and quietly said, "If I continue to exist after this, maybe we could go out and... do something. I mean, if you want to."

Corabeth was obviously stunned by the suggestion, but finally answered, "Yeah. I think I'd like that."

Lex broke into a grand smile, then happily went to work on crafting his illusion.

* * * * *

"Does anyone need any help?" Jhaartael asked as he walked from group to group.

"Celestial beings capable. Not need help." Zarall snapped irritably.

"I would advise you to never visit the faerie realms, I believe that you would not do well there." Jhaartael responded.

"No desire to commune with vermin." Jael said simply.

"Charming." Jhaartael said with a look askance, then added under his breath, "Whatever you do, don't ever fall asleep in my presence. You *have* been warned."

* * * * *

"Dad! Look at this!" Deimos called toward his father.

"What is it?" Ares asked curiously as he approached.

V looked curiously from the half-dragon to the Karasu Tengu and couldn't help but smile at the unlikely and wondrous world that he found himself in.

"Look at what V taught us to do." Deimos said before beginning to work through an awkward series of hand gestures.

"Thanks for teaching them. They don't get many opportunities to learn." Ares told V quietly.

"I don't get many opportunities to teach, so that works out well." V responded as he watched Deimos' moves carefully.

Ares watched and waited a moment longer, then noticed that a transparent film of flame seemed to envelope Deimos.

"See? I don't have to transform when I flame up now. And not only will it burn someone if they try to hurt me, but it also makes it so that I can walk through fire. I don't even have to do my clothes changing spell." Deimos excitedly explained.

"Well, if we have any bonfire malfunctions, I'll know who I can call upon to fix them." Ares said with a grin.

"While it may not have much application in day-to-day life, it's still a handy thing to have in one's repertoire." V said simply.

"I suppose so." Ares easily agreed, then added, "Since I don't have access to my own powers, I'm glad when the boys are able to learn *any* magic."

"Why is that?" V asked curiously.

"The descendents of the Brynn bloodline are all cursed with unwanted animal transformations and prevented from using the rest of our magic." Ares said as he kept the majority of his attention on his son.

"That must be a potent curse to follow a bloodline for generations." V said thoughtfully.

"Although I've heard the history, I don't know much about the magical side of things. Since my people haven't had access to their magic since anyone can remember, the knowledge of how to *use* magic hasn't been passed down." Ares said distantly.

"Your sons don't seem to be having any trouble accessing their magic right now." V said honestly.

"Jim isn't my son, although he's the next best thing. My other son is named Cain. He's still discovering what he can do with his magic. So far he's only been able to conjure up some stinky smoke." Ares said simply.

"What does it smell like?" V asked curiously.

"Like something died, then spoiled... in a sweaty sock." Ares said thoughtfully.

"It sounds like your son may have a quasi-elemental talent. If that's the case, it can be an incredibly useful talent to have." V said seriously.

"His brother has been teasing him, saying that his ability is to summon farts. So far we haven't thought of a circumstance when his ability would be useful." Ares said honestly.

"Well, the foul smelling smoke may not be that useful, but the talent for smoke exists between the talents for fire and air. Once the conjuration of smoke has been mastered, both air and fire may become accessible to him." V said sagely.

"That's good to know. Maybe when this is all over, I could get with D and find out if they have anyone who could teach him." Ares said thoughtfully.

"Yes. That sounds like a very good idea. I would offer to help except that I will have to return home when this adventure of ours is concluded." V said regretfully.

"Things have a way of going around and coming around. It wouldn't surprise me if our paths were to cross again." Ares said frankly.

"You know, I've noticed the same thing. It wouldn't bother me a bit if it turned out to be so." V said with a smile.

"Well, as long as you're not here possessing someone that I love. In that case, I probably wouldn't be as happy to see you here." Ares thought to add.

V laughed with delight, then admitted, "There are many different types of devils and demons. I don't have that ability, so I couldn't possess a person, even if I wanted to. That's not to say that I couldn't *cause* someone to be possessed by calling upon a demon who *does* have that ability. But there is absolutely no way that I could possess them myself." V explained.

"That's not *quite* as comforting as I might have liked." Ares slowly admitted.

"I don't have that ability either, that being, telling you what you want to hear." V said with a slight grin.

"Okay. *That* made me feel better." Ares said with a smile.

"Ares? Things are starting to wobble. I think you need to focus on the magical flow." Dark called from the Brynnhollow doorway.

"I've got to get back to work. You guys are doing great. Be sure to show me all the new things that you've learned when we finish." Ares said before hurrying away.

"What else can you teach us?" Deimos asked hopefully.

"Xaphan? Do you have any special fire tricks that you'd like to teach the boys?" V asked curiously.

The Yan-gant-y-tan demon raised one of his oversized hands as his fingertips burst into flame.

Chapter 53

"What are you looking for?" Corabeth asked cautiously.

After another long moment of searching, Lex quietly responded, "I still exist."

"What?"

"I'm finished casting my illusion. I've done what I was created to do. I wasn't sure if when I finished, if I'd just stop existing." Lex awkwardly explained.

"We still need to cast the barrier spell. Do you want to help us with that?" Corabeth asked with a demure hopeful smile.

Lex responded with a full-fledged smile of his own as he answered, "I'd love to."

* * * * *

"How's it going?" Agent Roberts quietly asked.

"I have no idea." Agent Fastbeck answered honestly.

"I'm glad it's not just me." Agent Roberts said with nervous laughter.

"I suppose we'd better stay close to our doors in case we're needed."

"It might not be a bad idea to stick close to Rhuru-wra in case he needs you to translate for him."

"He's so blissed out on the magical flow right now that I doubt that he wants to talk to anyone." Agent Fastbeck said honestly, then added more quietly, "Filipe, on the other hand, looks like he might benefit from some words of encouragement."

Agent Roberts glanced in Filipe's direction before saying, "With all the magic zinging around here, it's easy to forget that emotionally supporting the kids has become part of our job."

"If that's the case, then we might want to keep a close eye on Corabeth. I'm not entirely sure what's going on there, but I suspect that we have all the ingredients for a fairly potent heartbreak." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"Because of the charm that I wear, all I see when I look at G's illusion is a smudge in reality. I guess that makes it difficult for me to imagine someone forming an emotional attachment to it." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Just watch Corabeth when she's talking to him if you have any doubt about how seriously she's taking it." Agent Fastbeck suggested.

Agent Roberts watched for a moment, then winced when he saw Corabeth delightedly giggle at something that Lex had just said.

He glanced at Agent Fastbeck who was awaiting his reaction and quietly said, "Yeah. This is gonna hurt."

"It might be better if you're the one to talk to Filipe. I get the feeling that he has a lot of respect for you." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

"Yeah. The feeling's mutual. I'll leave Corabeth to you. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to make it easier on her."

"Just be available to help pick up the pieces. I think that's as much as any of us can do right now."

* * * * *

"Is this a good time to talk?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously as he approached.

"What? Oh, yeah. Sure." Filipe said distractedly.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. I just never channeled that much magic before. I didn't think it'd scare me so much." Filipe quietly admitted.

"What are you afraid of?" Agent Roberts asked gently.

"I don't know." Filipe muttered.

"Are you afraid of disappointing people or are you more afraid of being hurt?" Agent Roberts pressed.

"Well, I don't want to disappoint anyone, but that's not what's scaring me. There's so much magic and everything's going so fast. I just don't know if I'm strong enough to keep up with it." Filipe reluctantly admitted.

"I don't have enough experience with magic to tell you that you don't need to worry. The most I can do is remind you that the teachers 'do' have the experience to be able to judge if something is safe or not." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"I knew that. I guess that I'm just worried about nothing." Filipe quietly muttered.

Agent Roberts pulled Filipe into a hug as he said, "You're worried about something that's very real and very dangerous. There's nothing at all unreasonable about what you're feeling. As long as you're honest and tell your teachers if you're having any problems, then I trust that they won't allow you to do anything that's too dangerous."

"Yeah. I've been able to sense Professor Everstone's presence within the spell. He's been keeping track of what I'm doing the whole time that I'm spellcasting." Filipe admitted.

Agent Roberts released him, then looked him in the eyes before saying, "Remember that if you need another hug, I'll have one ready and waiting for you."

"Thanks Agent Roberts. I think maybe that's what I was needing. I feel a lot better now." Filipe said with an honest smile.

Agent Roberts stood and watched as Filipe turned and rejoined Professor Everstone and Dr. Williams in the spellcasting.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Dad?" Paul asked very carefully.

"It's a little strange for me. Most of the time when I'm called upon to do something magical, it's because it's something that needs to be done with great delicacy and precision. This time I'm just being asked to help out with the heavy lifting."

"Are you sorry that you volunteered to help us?"

"Not at all. It's just a different perspective for me. It's actually kind of nice to stand back and watch things happen from more of a distance. While I don't feel 'helpless', since I know that any concern I had would be seriously addressed, I also don't feel 'responsible' for managing the project, so I can stand back and observe."

"There's a chance that this may end up being the biggest, most important thing that I ever do. I'm glad that you're here to share it with me... with us. G's glad that you're here too." Paul quickly added.

"I appear to be the least of his worries at the moment." D said frankly.

Paul followed his gaze, then broke into an understanding smile as he said, "That's not G, he's beside Milo. That's Lex."

"It's not surprising that they look the same, but their mannerisms... How can they behave so much alike?" D asked curiously as he glanced toward Milo to verify that G was there.

"G already had Lex crafted and rigged, thanks to his sorcery classes. I'm guessing that when he was suddenly flooded with more magic than he's ever had before, it must've awakened some kind of ability that he inherited from you or Grandpa J." Paul said speculatively.

"Do you really think so?" D asked as he looked at Lex and Corabeth more intently.

"Yeah. It looks to me like he was able to animate his illusion in a way that he doesn't have to pay attention to it while it's running."

"Well, good. If that's how it is, then I'm not *quite* as worried about him chatting up that girl."

"Dad, this may not be what you first thought it was, but it could go wrong *sooo* many ways, I can't even tell you."

"No one looks like they're trying to intentionally hurt or use anyone and I suppose that there's always a chance that it will work out..." The dubious look from Paul prompted him to amend, "...and if that happens we'll make sure to buy V some ice skates for his trip home."

Paul couldn't help but smile as he nodded his agreement, then he hesitantly asked, "So, what do you think we should do?"

"Sometimes there's nothing you *can* do but stand back and watch the dumpster fire burn itself out."

* * * * *

After a particularly long and difficult passage of spellcasting, Corabeth quietly asked, "Is Lex short for Alexander?"

"No, Lexington."

"Like, the city?"

"Like the gargoyle." Lex said with a smile, then explained, "I guess when I was first created I wasn't very nice to look at. Paul wanted to give me a name instead of calling me 'it' or 'the illusion', so he suggested calling me Lex after a cartoon gargoyle."

"You're certainly not a gargoyle now. Would you rather have another name?" Corabeth asked curiously.

"No. I don't think so." Lex said thoughtfully, then explained, "Even though I was named after something ugly, there was more to it. G could tell that the Lex character was one that Paul enjoyed and admired. If anything, I'd like to be able to live up to the name that Paul gave me and become someone respectable and decent no matter what my physical appearance is like... well, depending on whether or not I'll get the chance. I could still just stop existing at any moment."

"If you think about it, considering what we're doing and the amount of magic involved, any of us could stop existing at any moment." Corabeth said frankly.

"I'll do whatever I can to see that that doesn't happen." Lex said sincerely as he looked deeply into her eyes.

"Break's over you two." Miss Oaken said before going back to casting the barrier spell.

After a shy smile shared between them, Corabeth and Lex returned to casting their spells.

* * * * *

"Is this a good time?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked as he approached.

"Actually, yes. I've established a steady rhythm in the base weave, so while I have to keep careful watch on my magical flow, I can split my concentration enough to hold a conversation." Paul said carefully.

"I saw you talking to your dad for a few minutes, so I thought it might be okay." Agent Roberts admitted.

"Was there something in particular that you wanted to discuss, or were you just lonely?"

"So, I see that you get snarky when you're under pressure."

"Not really. I just have the feeling that you're here for a reason so I was giving you an easy way to bypass the chit-chat."

"Oh? Well, thanks. I wanted to get your insights on G's clone. I need to assess him as a potential threat and thought that you might be a good resource to draw upon."

"I can probably tell you whatever you want to know about Lex's abilities or limitations, but I'm not going to be able to help you when it comes down to his state of mind or what kind of a person he is. He was a blank slate when I knew him, a puppet with his strings cut."

"I guess I'll have to work on that part next, but... how bad is it? How powerful is he?" Agent Roberts hesitantly asked.

"Honestly, at this point in time, he could probably stand toe-to-toe with any witch here. Where he's most disadvantaged is in training. He doesn't know any spells, any strategy and he doesn't have any instincts to fall back on."

"But he isn't even real. How can he be that powerful?"

"That's just because he's being fueled directly by the magic of the air element. If it weren't for that, he'd be sharing G's natural magic. He probably wouldn't be able to maintain sentience with that low of a magical flow."

"So, theoretically speaking, what would one have to do to interrupt the connection between Lex and his power source?"

"That's hard to say... if it were me, I can think of a few things that I could try that might have a chance of working. If we're talking about you... let's just say that this is one of those circumstances where being a mundane human is a real disadvantage."

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I need to know, will it help my situation if G is distracted or somehow incapacitated?"

"No. Lex is acting completely independently. G is already distracted enough with drawing up the air element that if it mattered, you'd

be seeing the strain on G and faltering in Lex." Paul said seriously, then added in a lower voice, "And if you do anything to hurt G, you'll have me to deal with..."

"Save your nightmare fuel, I'm not going to hurt him. I just needed to understand the connection between him and Lex in case Lex starts misbehaving." Agent Roberts said frankly.

Paul looked at him appraisingly for a moment, then quietly said, "Most people, even witches, are afraid of demons, especially when they're upset. Sometimes it bothers me when I see their automatic reactions to me. I'm still not sure how I feel about you *not* being afraid of me."

Agent Roberts smiled at the statement, then said, "Please take it as a sign of my admiration and respect. I trust you enough to know that you wouldn't attack me or anyone without good cause."

"Okay." Paul acknowledged, then continued, "Even though G may not be showing it right now, Lex is more than just a spell to him. He's put a lot of time and care into crafting him and making him look as life-like as possible. Having him essentially 'come to life' like this... it's almost like Pinocchio."

"You don't have to explain that part to me. I think I have a sense of how he feels." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Do you really think so?" Paul asked curiously.

"Have you met my shadow?" Agent Roberts asked with a smile.

"Oh, yeah. I guess you might be able to sympathize with what G is feeling." Paul admitted, then thought to ask, "Where is your shadow, anyway?"

"Dry humping Otis, over by the Waxell door." Agent Roberts said with a pained expression.

"Is that okay?" Paul cautiously asked as he followed his gaze.

"Otis doesn't seem to mind, and they really haven't done anything 'Hard-R', so..."

"... just let them have their fun?" Paul ventured.

"As Conrad said, 'Sometimes there's nothing you can do but stand back and watch the dumpster fire burn itself out.'" Agent Roberts said simply.

Just then, Otis glanced in Paul and Agent Roberts' direction and broke into a feverish blush.

As Paul and Agent Roberts watched, Otis whispered something, then Obby also turned to face them.

"Just keep in mind that there are children present." Agent Roberts called in their general direction.

Otis blushed even harder, but Obby seemed to take Shawn's words to heart and nodded his confirmation.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to get back to my multi-dimensional knitting." Paul said frankly.

"Of course, I wouldn't want to be responsible for you dropping a stitch."

Paul's smile faded into a look of concentration as he raised his hands and started doing a series of the most intricate spellcasting gestures that Agent Roberts had seen to date.

* * * * *

"Do you have a minute?"

"I don't really have an assigned task, so I have more minutes than I know what to do with." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Although I have an assigned task, it's what one would describe as the 'grunt work' of the spell. That being the case, there isn't much for me to do while the parameters are being defined." D explained.

"What can I do for you?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"It was just a thought, really. I heard somewhere that you can see through spells and illusions, is that right?" D asked curiously.

"Yes. Thanks to a pendant that the kids made for me, I'm able to see through most illusions and spells." Agent Roberts confirmed.

"I was just curious to know how you perceive this room that we're in." D said simply.

"How do you mean?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"How big was this room when you first walked in here?"

"I don't know, about ten or twelve feet square, I guess."

"And how many people do we have in here?"

Agent Roberts looked around, then quietly said, "I see what you mean. The inside of the Vinculum chamber seems to expand to accommodate the number of people inside. It never feels 'cramped', but it also never feels 'spacious'."

"I just wondered what you saw when you looked at it." D reiterated.

"I don't think I actually focused on it before, I just accepted the reality of what I expected to see." Agent Roberts said slowly as he looked around.

"And now that you 'are' focusing on it?" D prompted.

"Let's just say that I would have been a lot more comfortable *not* taking a closer look."

"Why? What do you see?" D asked curiously.

"From my point of view, we're standing on nothing, floating in a void. It's endless in all directions. The only interruptions in the nothingness are the doorways. Everything else is just a faded dream." Agent Roberts said quietly.

"Sorry I asked. I just thought that it would be interesting to hear your insights on what the Vinculum Chamber really is." D quietly explained.

"As far as I can tell, it's a room that exists several places at once." Agent Roberts said simply, then explained, "The areas of space where you'd expect to find the different iterations of the chamber are being used to store the pooled magic from the different barriers. This room that we're in is stretched to exist in the places where those other rooms are expected to be. The only reason any of this works is because of the stretching and skewing of the gazebo behind the Old Tennyson Place."

"Yes. That's a good way of putting it." D said with a smile, then remorsefully added, "Sorry about dispelling your illusion. I was just interested to know how you rationalized what you were witnessing here."

"No problem. Whether it's comfortable or not, I'd much rather deal with reality." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"I suspect that that is one of the reasons that you're where you are today." D said simply.

"Just how much do you have to do with 'where I am today'?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Very little. While I had some input in the decision to place Conrad here, I was only vaguely aware of your recruitment." D said simply.

"So you didn't have anything to do with me getting assigned to Waxell?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"No. I was consulted about the situation at the South Seid barrier. All I knew about you before meeting you in person was in relation to that." D said frankly.

"I don't know why, but I had the feeling that your involvement was a little *deeper* than what I was seeing." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Yeah. I give off that vibe. I think it's sort of a defense mechanism." D quietly admitted.

"Don't change a thing. Stick with what works." Agent Roberts chuckled.

"It sounds like Miss Oaken is going to need me to reinforce her barrier structure. If this keeps me tied up for too long, would you help keep an eye on the boys for me?"

"Does that include Lex?"

"I'll leave that to your discretion."

Agent Roberts nodded once, then watched as D joined Miss Oaken, Corabeth and Lex in their spellcasting.

* * * * *

"Are you mad at me?"

Agent Roberts didn't immediately recognize the voice and turned quickly.

"I didn't know if maybe I should be doing something to help you or your friends." Obby asked worriedly.

"As far as I know, everyone is already doing what needs to be done." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"Otis and I got to talking and he said that he didn't know if maybe since I'm not... you know... a person like you and him, that maybe there's something that I should be doing to help out." Obby said anxiously.

"The only one I can think of who might be able to use your help is Milo. He's the one with shadow magic, so it's possible that he could channel your magic or use your support in some way."

"I think that if he needed me for something, he'd ask me. I've tried to be nice to him and I don't think he's afraid of me now... as much. Do you think he's scared of me?" Obby asked worriedly.

"Maybe he was at first, but I don't get the feeling that he's afraid of you now. I'm pretty sure that if there were something you could do to help him that he'd ask you."

"But you're not mad at me?" Obby asked to confirm.

"No. I'm not mad at you at all." Agent Roberts assured him, then thought to add, "I'm glad that you're able to talk now."

"I can't always understand what you're saying when I'm flat, but I can always hear and understand you when you talk to me in the mirror. If I stop being able to talk, you can ask me yes and no questions in the mirror whenever you want."

"What about you and Otis? Is there anything I need to know about that?"

"Otis is nice and I like him. He actually wanted me to come over here and make sure that you're okay. He says that all he has to do is stay by the door and that I can keep him company while he does that."

"That sounds like a really good idea. You two just remember that there are kids around. Don't do anything *too* enthusiastic in front of them." Agent Roberts finished with a smile.

"We're probably just going to talk and maybe hold each other. Otis is nice to talk to. He's funny." Obby said warmly.

"I'm glad that you've found someone that you like to spend time with. That's much better than standing around, waiting for something to do."

"You can come over and talk with us! Otis won't mind. I think he likes you too." Obby said quickly.

"It's best if I stay by my own door." Agent Roberts said quietly, then added, "Besides, at this stage of things, I should probably keep my distance. If you and Otis end up seeing a lot of each other, then maybe I can hang out with you two later."

"Thank you... can I call you Shawn?"

"Sure. That's my name." Agent Roberts said with a grin, then thought to ask, "Is it okay if I keep calling you Obby?"

"You can call me anything you want. So far, I've been calling myself Obby, but I was thinking... I mean, if you wouldn't mind, I thought that maybe Obby could be short for Obbert."

"That sounds reasonable. Where did you come up with that?"

"I thought that Obbert sounded enough like 'Roberts' so that people would get that we're kind of related, but different enough to say that we're not related the same way that most people are."

"I can't argue with that."

"I'm glad you're not mad. I like my name. I like being me."

"All I want for you is to be happy." Agent Roberts said with a smile, then continued, "You'd better get back to Otis now. You wouldn't want for him to feel unloved."

"I don't want for anyone to feel unloved. That sounds horrible. I mean, like, the worst thing ever." Obby said grimly.

Agent Roberts pulled Obby into a hug and whispered, "Don't worry. It's just a figure of speech. Go take care of Otis."

"Okay." Obby said as he returned the hug.

* * * * *

"How are things going with the spellcasting?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he approached.

"I always expect it to be more exciting than it is." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Sometimes it is..." Agent Fastbeck weakly defended.

"And then there's now." Agent Roberts said as he looked around at all the people muttering and struggling to manipulate unseen forces all around them.

While the whole scene was intense and dramatic at first, that seemed to wear off after a while until only the mind-numbing sameness of it remained.

"We could check in on V and the boys. I mean, leaving young teenagers in the company of *literal* demons might be looked upon as being irresponsible." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Ares is here. We don't have to be responsible for the boys at all. If V... I don't know... corrupts them or something, as the parent and guardian Ares will be held to account. Any decision regarding what is appropriate for the boys to be involved in is his to make. The *most* we can do is verify that he knows about everything that's going on and approves of it." Agent Fastbeck said frankly.

Agent Roberts slowly nodded, then cautiously said, "I suppose that it's only natural for us to try and find a purpose for being here since our original purpose was served once we conducted them to the Southseid site."

"We're representing the interests of the FBI by making sure that these people are doing what they claim to be doing. Even though we've chosen to help them, it's always been within the framework of what's allowable. If at any point, any of these people had posed a legitimate threat to the United States government or her people, we would have reacted to mitigate the situation." Agent Fastbeck said seriously.

"Right. I'm glad that it hasn't come to that. I really like these people." Agent Roberts quietly admitted.

"I know." Agent Fastbeck assured him, "If there had been an incident I would have been conflicted, to say the least."

"Where *is* Andrea right now?" Agent Roberts asked knowingly.

"She's busy overseeing things in Brynnhollow." Agent Fastbeck said with a slight smile at the thought of her.

"What was that?"

"What?"

"Over there, through the Waxell doorway."

"Someone's out there."

"Kirwin! Otis! Do you want to help me with something?" Agent Roberts asked as he started walking toward the Waxell doorway.

Agent Fastbeck took a step to follow, but then decided that it would be better if he remained behind to keep an eye on things.

"Is there a problem?" V asked Agent Fastbeck as he approached.

"It's too early to be sure. Someone's snooping around outside the Waxell doorway. Just make sure you stay out of sight until we can assess the situation."

Within a heartbeat, V was basically the same size as Deimos and was significantly smaller than Jim.

"You don't have to worry about me, I can blend in." V assured him, then added, "And you don't have to worry about me stepping outside. I couldn't step through that doorway if I wanted to."

"I wasn't worried." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

"Maybe not now, but you might have been at some point. But you can save your worry for other things. Me and my helpers are content to balance the forces of fire against the forces trying to create a barrier where it isn't needed." V said frankly.

"Good. That's just what we need for you to be doing." Agent Fastbeck assured him.

* * * * *

"Dad?" Kirwin asked as he, Agent Roberts and Otis stepped out of the gazebo. Agent Roberts noticed that just as Otis had joined him, that Obby had 'attached' to him and become like a normal shadow.

"Kirwin? I was getting worried. How are you? Is your grandfather alright?" Warren asked anxiously.

"We're both fine." Kirwin immediately informed him.

"They're really okay." Otis interjected.

"Otis? What are you doing out here?" Warren asked confusedly.

"I asked him to come along, just in case he was needed for our investigation." Agent Roberts quickly said as he noticed that the dusk had nearly given away to night.

"I got the impression that you would just be stopping by for a few minutes to check on something." Warren said slowly.

"Yeah. It turns out that we found what we were looking for..."

"Don't tell me you found bodies buried out here." Warren interrupted.

"No. Not at all." Agent Roberts said with surprise at the suggestion.

"With the creepy feeling that's always surrounded this place I just *knew* that there was probably a mass grave or something out here. I bet the walls of that house are stuffed with dead hobos or something..." Warren nervously muttered.

"I need to check on something. I'll be right back." Kirwin said firmly, then turned back toward the gazebo and started walking before anyone could object or question what he was doing.

"I hate this place. It should have been burned to the ground a hundred years ago." Warren growled.

"This is your heritage, your family history. Be thankful for what you have. I would *love* to have a physical representation of the generational history of my family. What I've got instead is half-

remembered tales of people that might not have actually existed. I can't even imagine how much family history is lost to me because no one bothered to preserve it." Agent Roberts explained.

"You wouldn't feel that way if your family history surrounded a cancerous monument to fear like this." Warren challenged.

"I believe that having something is better than having nothing, but I think that we may have to agree to disagree on that point." Agent Roberts finished with a weary smile.

"Warren, come here." Steven's voice called.

Agent Roberts turned and saw Steven, being supported by his walker, framed in the archway of the gazebo.

"Dad? What are you doing?" Warren asked as Kirwin hurried past his grandfather and back to his father's side.

"Just come here so I can explain." Steven said firmly.

"Are you sure about this?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yes. This is not only the right thing for our situation, but also for Warren himself." Steven said confidently.

"What's going on?" Warren asked anxiously.

"C'mon, Dad!" Kirwin said as he took Warren's hand and began to urge him toward the gazebo.

"I think that if you just go along, you'll have all your questions answered." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"But I didn't ask. I never wanted to know. I don't want to have anything to do with this place." Warren protested.

"Has he always been like this?" Agent Roberts asked Steven as he fought the urge to throw the stubborn man over his shoulder and carry him to the gazebo.

"He's his mother's son." Steven said wearily.

"It appears that our options are very limited right now. If you expose him to something that he can't handle we could conceivably be forced to take a drastic action, no matter how much we might not want to." Agent Roberts said with dark urgency under his words.

"This may be our only chance to unite as a family, our last chance. I understand what you're saying and I'll accept responsibility for whatever happens." Steven said solemnly.

"Then I hope that something good comes from doing this." Agent Roberts said honestly.

There was a momentary pause, then light rain started falling.

"Warren, you're a grown man. We can't *make* you do anything against your will. Right now I'm asking, as your father, if you will come with us and share in this very important part of our lives." Steven asked hopefully.

"All three of us should be part of this." Kirwin interjected.

"That's right. If you refuse, this chance will be lost forever." Steven added.

"I'm not agreeing to anything, but what *exactly* do you want me to do?" Warren cautiously asked.

"Go inside the gazebo and meet some new friends of ours. If you'll do that much and just listen for a few minutes, I don't think either of us will ask anything more of you. However things end up going, we'll consider it settled." Steven said seriously.

"Your friends are inside the gazebo?"

"Yes. You can't see them from out there." Steven said encouragingly.

Warren looked down at his son and quietly asked, "You really want me to do this, don't you?"

"All three of us can be part of something really important and we can help people in ways that nobody else can."

"Is this the thing you and your grandfather keep whispering about?"

"Yeah. Grandpa said that he already asked you and you said that you didn't want to help." Kirwin said frankly.

"I don't remember ever being asked." Warren said honestly.

"I couldn't just come out and ask you. I had to suss out your opinion on things by talking with you in parables and the like."

"You mean those weird bedtime stories that you used to tell me?"

"Yes, that's right. Those bedtime stories were to expose you to ideas and possibilities that you might never consider otherwise." Steven said frankly.

"I still remember the story that you used to tell me about making friends with the angels. That always made me feel so happy." Warren said distantly.

"It turns out that angels are better as a concept..." Steven began to say.

"C'mon Dad. Do this with us and we can talk about things as much as you want later." Kirwin urged.

Warren glanced at Agent Roberts and Otis uncertainly before finally saying, "Okay. I'll go see what you're talking about. But remember that you said that I don't have to stay and participate in whatever this is if I don't want to."

"Give it five minutes. If you decide that you don't want to be a part of it in that time, we won't push for you to stay." Steven assured him.

Agent Roberts glanced at Steven uncertainly.

Steven gave a slight shake of his head, then motioned for his son to step forward to the gazebo archway.

Chapter 54

Stepping into the gazebo was like stepping into another world.

While the others were more used to the sight, seeing Warren's awe made the wonder of it feel new.

"Warren, I'd like for you to meet V, Xaphan, Deimos and Jim." Agent Roberts cautiously introduced.

"What is *that*?" Warren whispered with a tremble of fear in his voice.

Agent Roberts followed Warren's terrified gaze to verify which of many disturbing things to which he was referring.

"That's Xaphan, he's a demon. He was summoned here to help us. Don't worry, he's on our side." Agent Roberts assured him.

"Are those boys going to be safe with it?" Warren asked anxiously.

Agent Roberts fought down his urge to laugh at the question and quietly assured Warren, "The boys will be fine."

"Would you mind showing Warren around? I'd feel better if I could stay by the door." Otis quietly asked.

"I know what you mean. I should probably be doing that too." Agent Roberts chuckled, then said to Warren, "If you'll come over here to the table in the middle of the room, I'll introduce you to the people running this whole thing."

Warren took one step, then froze in his tracks as he focused on Rhuru-wra on the other side of the room.

"Is that a bigfoot?" Warren asked in amazement.

"Yes. But that's not all he is. Rhuru-wra is also an aspiring Wizard and a brave adventurer. Among his people he is known as 'The Wanderer'."

"It's... like a person?" Warren asked in confusion.

"Yes. In fact, everyone you're going to meet here are different varieties of people... well, almost everyone, there are one or two that I'm not completely sure about yet." Agent Roberts fought to clarify.

"Just one or two?" Warren muttered as he slowly looked around the room uncomprehendingly.

"Yeah. And before we go too far, you need to know that the majority of these people are involved in a project to help protect some vulnerable communities. They may not be able to break away from their tasks to talk to you. If they're concentrating on something else, please don't interrupt them." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"It's hard for me to believe that I'm here talking to them at all. Is that an elf?" Warren suddenly asked hopefully.

"Yes. His name is Jhaartael. Would you like to meet him?" Agent Roberts asked with a smile.

"If he's not too busy, I'd really like to."

"As far as I know, Jhaartael has been searching for some way to help out." Agent Roberts said honestly as he led the group into a neighboring 'quadrant' of the gazebo.

"Is that a demon?" Warren asked as he struggled to see everyone they were walking past.

"Yes. His name is Paul. He's very busy right now. If you hang around here for a while I'm sure that you'll get a chance to talk to him. He's a very friendly person."

"A demon... named Paul?" Warren asked uncertainly.

"Yes. You can ask him about it later." Agent Roberts said simply, then said more formally, "Warren Tennyson, I am honored to

present Jhaartael. I don't know his formal title, but there's no doubt that he *does* have one."

"I am the Duke Jhaartael, sovereign lord of five of the nine realms of Anthea." Jhaartael proudly announced.

"That sounds really impressive, but I don't know what that means." Kirwin reluctantly said from his father's side.

"It means that if a child goes to bed hungry, that I have failed in my duties. If two neighbors can't work out a dispute to their mutual satisfaction, then it falls to me to mediate a compromise that neither will believe is equitable. Whatever bounty rains down upon the realm is surely the benevolence of the gods. But any ill that befalls us is due to my greed, short sightedness or sheer stupidity."

"That sounds awful." Kirwin quietly admitted.

"Those who are strong enough, both magically and intellectually, rise to positions of power. We serve those who are less capable and we are hated for it. Such is the nature of things."

"Are you really an elf?" Warren asked with boyish delight.

"Yes. Although I prefer to be counted as one of the Faerie Folk. Elves are but one of the different types of faeries and I do my best to represent all of them equally." Jhaartael explained.

"Do you see the half-elf over there at the table? That's Jhaartael's son, Milo." Agent Roberts said as he gestured in that direction.

"I see the half-elf and a demon, but what is that other thing?" Warren quietly asked.

"That's Reaper, called by his or her people, 'The Child of the Sword'." Agent Roberts carefully explained.

"His or her?" Warren cautiously asked.

"Sometimes Reaper's appearance fluctuates between being more male or female in general aesthetic. But most of the time Reaper is gender neutral." Agent Roberts explained.

"But what is he... she... it, I mean, what species?" Warren struggled to ask.

"A Nephilim, the offspring of an angel and a human."

"An *angel*? Like a *real live* angel?" Warren asked in wonder.

"Um. Yeah." Agent Roberts said slowly, then glanced at Steven before saying, "There are a couple of angels over here, if you'd like to meet them."

"Could I?"

"Yeah. Just... don't get your hopes up. Okay?"

Warren enthusiastically nodded.

Agent Roberts dutifully led the way past Reaper into the quadrant of the room where Mr. Hansen, Mr. Couleigh, Zarall and Jael were muttering and seemed to be concentrating.

"They seem to be busy right now. We probably shouldn't interrupt them." Agent Roberts whispered as they approached.

"Are they *really* angels?" Warren asked with tears of joy welling in his eyes.

"Yes. They're cherubim, from one of the many choirs of angels." Jhaartael quietly answered.

"They're so beautiful." Warren whispered in awe.

"Do you really think so?" Agent Roberts asked incredulously.

"It's like a dream come true." Warren quietly admitted.

"One person's dream is another person's nightmare, I suppose." Jhaartael said sagely.

"Yeah. Given the choice, I'd rather spend time with Milo's choir than with those angels." Agent Roberts admitted.

"Just how much do you know about that?" Jhaartael cautiously asked.

"I saw them in their statue forms at the ruined church and then I saw them here when Milo summoned them. Milo mentioned that they would automatically defend him... I think that's about it." Agent Roberts finished thoughtfully.

"The skill that he has employed, it has such potential for being misused." Jhaartael said gravely.

"I can't say that I know Milo well enough to tell you not to worry about it, but he doesn't strike me as the type of person who would intentionally hurt people."

"He's an oddling, without a doubt. I think I worry so much because I don't understand him. I can't tell myself that he's going to be alright because, for the life of me, I can't follow his reasoning."

"In the short time that I've known Milo, I've seen him switch his objectives several times. I think that if I tried to analyze and predict his actions that I would probably end up as frustrated as you are. I have the feeling that he desperately wants to believe in something bigger than himself and be a part of it, but he doesn't have any real 'plan', so to speak."

"Yes. That *does* sound like him." Jhaartael admitted.

"When he finds a cause, he throws himself into it, devoting all his passion. Then later, when his cause turns out to be less worthy than he had anticipated, he withdraws, feeling to some degree that the failure was his, for not working hard enough." Agent Roberts said speculatively.

"You say that you don't know my son well, but to me it seems that you know him better than he knows himself." Jhaartael said frankly.

"It's the FBI training. It forces you to identify people's motives to aid in predicting their behavior."

"What can you predict about my son?" Jhaartael asked cautiously.

"Look at him. He's a hero. What I predict for him is a long and happy future of being able to look back on a monumental accomplishment and possibly even serve as a mentor to inspire the next generation."

"What's that?" Warren asked suddenly.

"That's another demon. I think I remember her being introduced as Nomia. She's here helping Paul. That's really all that I know about her." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"But she's so different from the other one... Xaphan." Warren said thoughtfully.

"Just like there are many different types of faeries and angels, so are there many different types of demons." Jhaartael said informatively.

"Holy shit!" Paul suddenly gasped.

Everyone, all around the gazebo, turned their full attention toward Paul to see what had spooked him so badly.

After a long moment, Paul gravely said, "Guys. We've got a problem."

"What's wrong?" Agent Roberts immediately asked.

"We are *so* screwed. I just felt the entire barrier shifting, all at once. With everything else that we've been doing, nobody thought about anchoring the stupid thing. It's MOVING!" Paul finished in a rush.

"Isn't the barrier anchored to the Vinculum Chamber?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously into the silence that followed.

"Yes, in a way, but not really. Not in the way that you're thinking, anyway. When you're dealing with multidimensional spatial coordinates, you need to use an anchor that's based on the *framework* of the universe, not on one of the *instances* of it." Paul fought to explain.

"I should have thought of that. I even checked to see that Mars was in retrograde to gauge the influences on our spelling today. It never occurred to me to verify if the Vinculum itself was anchored." Mr. Hansen said anxiously.

"What can we do to fix it?" Agent Roberts quickly asked, always willing to skip directly to a solution when possible.

"We'd have to do a spell based in astrology to serve as an anchor. While I understand the mechanics of what we'd have to do, I don't know how to do it. I don't know *any* astrology spells." Paul finished gravely.

"That won't be an issue. I have more than enough familiarity with several traditional ceremonies that utilize astrological superstructures." Professor Everstone assured the increasing group who were gathering around the table where the Magi were still weaving their spells.

"I can't do more than what I'm already doing." Paul warned him without any trace of shame behind the words.

"I too am at my limit." Professor Everstone admitted, then continued, "However, that is why I spoke of *ceremonies* rather than spells. The only difficulty I foresee might be in adjusting our current efforts to allow Filipe and Mr. Hansen the freedom to conduct the ceremony."

"I'm barely keeping up with what I'm doing now. I can't do more." Filipe immediately warned him.

"Worry not. I am certain that Dr. Williams and I will be able to compensate for your absence from the spellcasting for a short time." Professor Everstone said confidently.

"While I appreciate your confidence and optimism, allow me to state so that there will be no doubt, we *will* need Filipe's help to complete this project." Dr. Williams said firmly.

"Yes, yes. I'm not so deluded that I can't recognize our limitations. But if we are to bring this matter to resolution in the current time with the people we have available, I can see no other way to proceed."

"Since I don't know what you have in mind, I suppose that I will have to take your word for that." Dr. Williams said frankly.

"Quite simply, what I propose is to assemble a group of people to represent the Houses of the Zodiac and lead them through a simple ceremony which, in theory, will result in the Vinculum chamber associating itself with the superstructure of the multiverse. I believe that Mr. Hansen is familiar enough with astrology to organize the spell and Filipe has developed his thaumaturgical ability to the point where he will be able to magically establish the bond between the ceremony participants and their astrological counterparts."

"Wait. Wait. Are you saying that in the middle of everything else that's going on, you want to put on some kind of a play?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"Our other choice would be to stop what we're doing and begin again several days from now, when we can get everyone together and back up to full power." Professor Everstone said seriously.

"No. We've already decided that this is our one and only chance to do this." Agent Roberts reluctantly admitted.

"Dr. Williams and I are going to be a bit overburdened compensating for Filipe's absence from our spelling endeavor. Would you help Mr. Hansen with the organization of the ceremony?" Professor Everstone asked hopefully.

"Of course. I'll do whatever I can to help." Agent Roberts immediately assured him.

"Can you guys handle this?" Mr. Hansen asked cautiously as he backed away from his spellcasting group.

"We are not *guys*. We are *angels*." Zarall said sternly.

"Go and do what you need to do. I've got this." Mr. Couleigh assured him.

"Are you sure?" Mr. Hansen asked, as he spared a distasteful look at the cherubs.

Mr. Couleigh followed his gaze as he said with a slight growl in his voice, "Leave it to me."

"It will just take me a minute to disengage." Mr. Hansen responded, then began performing a different series of casting hand signs, different from those he had been doing rhythmically before.

Agent Roberts glanced over to see that Filipe was doing basically the same thing.

Without understanding the meanings of the hand signs, Agent Roberts couldn't be sure of anything except that intense magic was being performed.

"What do we need to do first?" Agent Roberts asked aloud, not at all sure of who he was even asking.

"We need to choose people to represent the astrological Houses. Once the people are chosen, we will have Filipe link them into the ceremonial spell." Mr. Hansen slowly explained.

"I don't know what qualities you're looking for, so I don't know who to recommend."

"Before we begin, know that a valid selection can be made with someone who seems not to match *any* of the criteria." Mr. Hansen said as he seemed to suddenly become calm.

"I don't understand." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"For example, to represent the astrological House of Aries, I suggest that we use Ares. I don't know if he has any qualifications besides his name, but in the absence of other considerations, I'm inclined to go with it."

"So qualifications don't matter?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"They matter, but they don't mean everything." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"I still don't know what you're asking me to do." Agent Roberts said urgently.

"Of the people here, who would you say is dependable, strong... maybe a little stubborn." Mr. Hansen asked in a leading tone.

"I don't really know anyone here that well. But based strictly on first impressions I would guess that you're talking about V." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"I wasn't talking about anyone, I was listing the more common personality traits of a Taurus." Mr. Hansen carefully explained.

"But we need V where he is to keep an unwanted barrier from forming." Agent Roberts warned.

"This shouldn't interfere with that. While the Magi and spellcasters couldn't break away to participate in this, most of the rest will be able to join in if they wish."

"So they have to agree to do it?"

"Yes. The ceremony won't work correctly with the unwilling. But if you think about it, everyone is here by choice for the express purpose of helping those in need."

"Except for the cherubim." Agent Roberts said simply.

"Fuck them." Mr. Hansen let slip, then caught himself and amended, "Excuse me. What I meant to say was that their assistance won't be necessary for what we're planning to do."

"Whatever you say... so does this mean that we ready to start with Ares and V?"

"Yes. Filipe, are you ready?" Mr. Hansen asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I think so." Filipe answered as he approached.

"What I'm going to show you is a very simple spell. All you're going to be doing is using the principles of thaumaturgy to magically associate two things as being 'like'." Mr. Hansen carefully explained.

"We do stuff like that all the time in my Thaumaturgy class, so I should be okay with it." Filipe said seriously.

"Let me show you the hand gestures first. Since you're taking Thaumaturgy class, I'm sure that all of these will be familiar to you." Mr. Hansen said professionally.

After a moment of watching, Warren quietly asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Leo." Agent Roberts answered without turning his gaze from Filipe and Mr. Hansen.

"Excuse me?" Warren asked cautiously, not entirely sure that Agent Roberts' response had actually been directed at him.

"Dag, Warren asked if he can help." Agent Roberts said more loudly.

Mr. Hansen glanced away from Filipe toward Warren for a moment, then said, "Yes. He can help. He can be Leo."

"See?" Agent Roberts asked with a smile at Mr. Hansen's declaration.

"What do you want me to do?" Warren asked cautiously.

"Hey, Dag, if Warren agrees to be Leo, what's he going to have to do?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

After a moment more of talking quietly to Filipe, Mr. Hansen looked up and said, "He would have to allow Filipe to cast a spell on him, then he would have to agree to follow the stage directions of a basic astrological ceremony."

"How bad do you think that will be for an average human?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"As I said, as long as the participants are there by their own choice, most of the rest tends to work itself out. It's one of those cases when doing your best is usually good enough."

"So, you're saying that he has to *try*?" Agent Roberts asked uncertainly.

"Yes. Honestly and sincerely. If he'll do that much, it should work out just fine."

"What do you think, Warren? Can you do that?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I don't know." Warren said slowly, then turned to Mr. Hansen and quietly said, "You never mentioned anything about 'belief'."

"Some of the more religious types of magic require belief, especially from humans. But astrology is one of those disciplines that tend to work more scientifically. You do a thing and another thing happens as a result." Mr. Hansen explained.

"I think I'm ready. What do you need for me to do next?" Filipe quietly asked.

"If Warren agrees to it, you could try your incantation on him." Mr. Hansen suggested.

"Tell me again, why do you need Filipe to do this? Why aren't you doing it yourself?" Agent Roberts slowly asked.

"I'm reasonably well versed in Astrology, but I have little natural talent for Thaumaturgy. If I were to try and create the links to the astrological framework, chances are that most, if not all of the linkages would fail."

"Will you let me put the spell on you?" Filipe asked Warren hopefully.

"I don't know if I even *believe* in any of this!" Warren said with evident frustration.

"Dad, this is what Grandpa and I are doing here. If there's a way that we can help these people, we're going to do it." Kirwin said frankly.

"If you really mean that, we *could* use your help." Mr. Hansen said simply.

"What can I do?" Kirwin asked hopefully.

"Filipe, will you set Kirwin up as Aquarius?"

"Is it okay? Do you want to do this?" Filipe asked Kirwin cautiously.

"It's not going to hurt, is it?" Kirwin hesitantly asked.

"Nope. Not even a little bit. I'll put the spell on you, then all you'll have to do is move where we tell you and maybe say some words. I don't know much about that part. Mr. Hansen is doing the ceremony."

"But no pain? You promise?" Kirwin asked to be sure.

"Yeah. I swear it." Filipe said firmly.

"Okay. What do I have to do?" Kirwin asked nervously.

"Just stand there for a second while I 'make you' Aquarius. You shouldn't feel anything at all." Filipe explained as he began to perform the descriptive spellcasting gestures.

"What are you doing to him?" Warren asked anxiously as he watched.

"Kirwin is a person, he's a male, he's a teen..." Mr. Hansen said as he watched what Filipe was doing, "...in doing this, Filipe is making it so that Kirwin *is* Aquarius."

"You know, when you're playing a board game and you use a piece on the board to represent you? It's like that, except you're the piece

and you're representing Aquarius." Filipe explained as he stopped his gestures.

"Well done, Filipe. That was perfect." Mr. Hansen said appreciatively.

"How do you feel?" Warren asked his son anxiously.

"I don't feel any different." Kirwin said honestly.

"Do you think I should do it?" Warren asked uncertainly.

"If you don't, then why are you here? What difference does it make if you show up and don't help out?" Kirwin asked frankly.

"He makes a good point. Observing from a distance contributes nothing. The only way to become a part of all of this is to step up and participate." Steven told his son.

"Is that what you and Kirwin have been doing all this time?" Warren asked curiously.

"No. We've been waiting until the day that we were needed." Steven said simply, then added with a smile, "This is what we've been waiting for. It's not too late. You can join in."

"Do you want to help us? Because I've got a role for you if you're interested." Mr. Hansen cautiously offered.

"Yes. I'd love to help, if I may." Steven said with a grand smile.

"Filipe, would you imbue Steven with the essence of Virgo?" Mr. Hansen asked with a slight smile.

"The virgin?" Steven asked with a chuckle.

"No. Virgo is dependable and patient, although sometimes critical and judgemental."

"Dad, it sounds made for you. Go ahead and do it and I'll go next." Warren assured him.

"Are you ready, Steven?"

"More than you can possibly know."

"Filipe?"

"Yeah. Let's do this."

* * * * *

"Who's next?" Filipe asked as he looked around the gathering.

"Why don't we go ahead and take care of Ares and V, then we can start looking for the other participants?"

As Filipe and Mr. Hansen started toward the Waxell door, where V was located, they were intercepted by Archdruid Highley.

"Are you looking for the players for the astrological spell that you're going to be doing?"

"Yes. And while I appreciate your enthusiasm, the probability of needing to traverse the gates makes the gatekeepers ineligible..."

"I sometimes have premonitions. I had one earlier that told me that you would need Linnaeus and Den to make your astrology spell work properly."

"But they are already acting as bridges." Mr. Hansen said slowly.

"All I know is that according to my vision, Linnaeus and Den *will* participate. If you fight against what is fated to be, you can cause untold damage to your cause." Archdruid Highley somberly warned.

"You're already planning to use Ares, and *he's* a bridge." Filipe interjected.

"Yes. That *is* true." Mr. Hansen reluctantly agreed.

"With his multiple legs and the way he arches his torso when walking, Linnaeus seems like a natural choice for 'Scorpio'." Archdruid Highley cautiously offered.

"Or a supernatural choice." Agent Roberts interjected with a grin.

Filipe and Archdruid Highley rolled their eyes as Mr. Hansen shook his head and groaned.

"Sorry." Agent Roberts said quietly, valiantly trying to suppress his laughter.

"As we were saying... Linnaeus would do well in the part of Scorpio. For the matter of Den, I saw him representing Libra. I can't speak to his qualifications, I just know what I saw."

"Dag, is there any reason at all for us not to just go with it?" Agent Roberts asked seriously

"That's not how I typically operate. However, in this instance it does seem the appropriate way to go."

"Who do you want for me to do next?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Let's take advantage of Jarvis while we have him with us." Agent Roberts said with a smile in his direction.

At Filipe's uncomprehending stare, Agent Roberts explained, "Linnaeus doesn't speak our language. Archdruid Highley can translate for us. It's best for us to make our move while we have everything we need close at hand."

"So I'm doing those guys next?" Filipe asked to be sure.

"Yes." Agent Roberts said as he guided Filipe to walk with him, then asked Jarvis over his shoulder, "You coming?"

Archdruid Highley and Mr. Hansen shared a look, then moved in unison to join Agent Roberts and Filipe.

* * * * *

"Guys? Would you like to help us out with something?" Agent Roberts asked as he approached Linnaeus and Den, standing side-by-side at the Nevermore doorway.

"The feeling of all this magic flowing through me is so trippy that you could kill me right now and I wouldn't even care." Den said blissfully.

"Is he going to be okay for the ceremony?" Agent Roberts asked uncertainly.

"He should be fine. All he has to do is stand where we tell him and possibly recite a passage of text, if that even turns out to be necessary at all." Mr. Hansen said slowly.

"Are you okay, Den?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"I'm better than I've ever been in my life." Den said happily, then glanced at Linnaeus at his side and continued, "Even if none of the rest of this happened it would all be worth it just to get to know Linny."

"Do you want me to go ahead and do it?" Filipe asked uncertainly.

"Linnaeus? Would you be willing to accept a spell cast upon you to make you the living representation of Scorpio?" Mr. Hansen asked carefully.

Archdruid Highley followed up with a brief statement in another language.

Linnaeus expression broke into a delighted smile and even though most present couldn't understand his screeching language, none had any doubt of what his answer was.

"Seven signs I grant you, yourself being the eighth. Holding close to Libra, close as brothers, continue forward, this I bestow, in this world be now the living representation of Scorpio." Filipe said as he performed seven very precise and distinct hand signs.

Agent Roberts watched curiously, since the spelling seemed unlike the others that he had witnessed.

"Why did you choose that spell?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"Because of what Den just said. They need to do this together and if I weave that into the spell, their unity will only make it stronger." Filipe carefully explained.

"I need to confer with Mrs. Tabbert about what she's teaching you in Astrology. Not only is that a very useful adaptation, but it's also a bit higher level than I would have anticipated for someone your age." Mr. Hansen said honestly.

"I didn't learn that in class. I learned it because of Paul. He's always changing spells and making them do things that they weren't intended to do. Now I'm kind of in the habit of looking at spells as being things that can be bent and twisted to do exactly what I need them to do instead of just being 'close enough'." Filipe explained.

"Perhaps it's a consequence of growing up and having to pay a penalty for every failed spell. It makes one reluctant to 'color outside the lines' so to speak." Mr. Hansen said consideringly.

"Yeah. Paul and I both learned about magic about a year ago, so we never learned *not* to try new things." Filipe said thoughtfully.

"Are you okay, Linny?" Den asked his companion with concern.

Linnaeus gleefully screeched his response.

Den smiled at the reaction, then turned to Filipe and said, "You can do me next."

"Be the shield. Be the armor. Be the sword. Be not the wielder but the wielded. In this is your strength. In this you are Libra." Filipe said professionally.

"Whoa. That one just sent a chill straight up my spine." Agent Roberts chuckled.

"Thanks, kid. What was your name again?"

"Filipe."

"Thanks Fil. If you ever need anything, come and see me..." Den said sincerely, then was interrupted by Linnaeus' wheezy screech.

"Us, come and see *us.*" Den finished with a smile.

"I will." Filipe promised, then was guided by Agent Roberts to start across the room, back toward the Waxell doorway.

"Who are we doing next?" Filipe asked as they walked.

"V?" Agent Roberts asked as he turned to look at Mr. Hansen inquisitively.

"Yes. V first, then Ares." Mr. Hansen confirmed.

"If Ares is anything like Linnaeus and Den, then maybe we should plan on doing Dark as well." Agent Roberts cautiously suggested.

"Ares only qualifies due to his name. Dark doesn't even have that much going for him." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"Does a person have to have the right name or right animal transformation to make them right for a particular sign?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"No." Mr. Hansen admitted, "There are any number of qualifications. Some have to do with personality and some seeming to be completely random, like their choice of clothing or jewelry that day."

"What would Dark need to do to get picked as one of the star signs?" Filipe asked curiously.

"I suppose the easiest way would be to assess his personality and see if his natural traits are the notable traits associated with one of the astrological Houses." Mr. Hansen said thoughtfully.

"He's loyal. By everything that I've seen, he seems to be absolutely devoted to Ares and the boys." Agent Roberts said seriously, then asked, "Does that sound like any of the Houses to you?"

"Cancer, almost verbatim." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

When no more was said on the subject, all present took it as a sign that the matter had been resolved.

* * * * *

"V, would you be available to help us out with something?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"Certainly. What can I do for you?" V asked pleasantly.

"Dag will have to explain it. I'm having a little trouble wrapping my head around the whole thing." Agent Roberts shyly admitted.

"You're doing fine with it." Mr. Hansen assured him, then said to V, "We need to anchor the Vinculum chamber so that the barriers that we're creating won't unseat due to the drift of the multiverse."

"That sounds like a reasonable step to take. How can I help you?" V asked pleasantly.

"We were thinking that you could represent one of the astrological Houses to form the anchor." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

"As much as I would like to help you with that, I'm afraid that my infernal influence on your spell might do more harm than good. I'm assuming that you didn't want to anchor your Vinculum to a hell dimension."

"No. That wouldn't be my first choice." Mr. Hansen admitted.

"I'm an *arch*demon. Although I don't go around shooting off my magic in every direction, that doesn't mean that I am powerless. If you were to include me as an anchor, my power could conceivably override that of all the other participants. It might very well cause your Vinculum chamber to permanently anchor to the Meayithan Realm." V said seriously.

"Yeah. Let's not do that." Agent Roberts quietly suggested.

"Thank you for thinking this through. I suppose that when I was looking at the qualifications for the Houses, you were such a

perfect fit for Taurus that I just considered it settled." Mr. Hansen shyly admitted.

"What are the qualifications for Taurus?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Dependable... strong... really strong willed." Filipe slowly recalled.

"Rhuru-wra." Agent Roberts said simply.

"What was that?" Mr. Hansen asked as he turned his attention back toward Agent Roberts.

"It sounds like Rhuru-wra would be an excellent candidate for Taurus." Agent Roberts said frankly.

After a moment to consider, Mr. Hansen admitted, "He *does* seem to have the requisite personality traits."

"Let's go talk to him. I can't wait to see his reaction." Agent Roberts said with a grin as he led the way.

Chapter 55

"Conrad, have you got a minute?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"I have several. What can I do for you?" Agent Fastbeck responded easily.

"We have a question to ask Rhuru-wra and I was hoping that you could translate for us."

"I thought you could speak to him without a translator." Agent Fastbeck said cautiously.

"I can usually get his meaning and I think he mostly understands what I'm trying to say to him, but this is one of those cases where I think it's probably better to have a more accurate translation. I just don't want to take the chance of getting Rhuru-wra to agree to something and then find out that he didn't understand what I was asking."

"Is this about what Paul was talking about, us not being anchored?" Agent Fastbeck asked curiously.

"Yes. Dag and Filipe have a fix for that, but they're going to need a few people to help them."

"There's not much for them to do but agree to it. The ceremony is actually quite simple." Mr. Hansen quickly interjected.

"I think that I can safely speak on Rhuru-wra's behalf when I say that he will be happy to help you however he can." Agent Fastbeck said as he motioned for the others to walk with him toward the doorway where Rhuru-wra was standing.

"Roo, these guys wanted to know if you'd like to help them with something." Agent Fastbeck said gently to the large beast.

Rhuru-wra loosed a low tranquil growl that revealed just how relaxed he was at that moment.

"The Vinculum Chamber and the barriers are drifting, thanks to the movement of the multiverse. We just wanted to know if you'd like to help us anchor it." Agent Roberts explained as succinctly as he was able.

A shorter, sharper growl was his response.

"He wants to know what he has to do." Agent Fastbeck translated.

"If he will agree to allow us to put a spell on him to make him the embodiment of Taurus, then the most we might do is ask him to move to another part of the chamber and possibly say a few words of a spell." Mr. Hansen explained.

Agent Fastbeck relayed what Mr. Hansen said, then listened for a moment as Rhuru-wra responded.

"He says that he'll be happy to help however he can and that he wants you to ask him if you need anything at all."

"Yes. We'll be happy to do that." Mr. Hansen immediately agreed.

"One above many. One of many. One alone. Strength of hand, strength of will and strength of word. Such is Taurus." Filipe said reverently as he performed the gestures.

Once the spell was complete, Rhuru-wra scooped Filipe up into a gentle hug.

Filipe laughed and did his best to hug Rhuru-wra in return, although his size made it nearly impossible.

"Who's next?" Agent Roberts asked with a smile as he waited for Filipe to join them.

"Ares and Dark." Mr. Hansen said simply.

"How many do we have left after that?"

"Four."

"Do you already know who they're going to be?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Not exactly." Mr. Hansen admitted.

"How does that work?" Agent Fastbeck asked curiously from Agent Roberts' side.

"I don't know their names, but I saw people who would fit by virtue of their animal transformations." Mr. Hansen said slowly.

"That's no problem. Just tell me who you've got and I'll round them up for you." Agent Fastbeck said simply.

"I was thinking that the young centaur would serve well as Sagittarius."

"Jim." Agent Fastbeck said with a nod.

"And I thought that I saw a goat faun earlier..."

"Tannis, he's Jim's younger brother."

"That works out well. The next one wasn't a transformation, but I noticed a set of identical twins..." Mr. Hansen said slowly, hoping to see a spark of recognition in Agent Fastbeck's eyes.

"Cain and Deimos. Cain transforms into a dog... sort of. Deimos turns into a half-dragon. Which one do you want?"

"How close are they? I mean, some twins seem to be almost psychically connected." Mr. Hansen asked cautiously.

"I've been around them quite a bit and they seem to be close, just like you'd expect. They're not 'freakishly' close, but they sometimes finish each other's' sentences and they're usually fairly considerate of each other." Agent Fastbeck said cautiously.

Noticing that Filipe had joined them, Agent Roberts asked, "Are we ready?"

"Are you going to need me for anything right now?"

"No. Not that I can think of. We're just going to be talking to Ares and Dark for a few minutes."

"Good. Then I'll go get Tannis and Cain while you're doing that." Agent Fastbeck said decisively.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Ares?" Agent Roberts asked gently as he approached.

"One perfect day..." Ares said peacefully.

"What was that?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"That's what it feels like to have all this magic flowing through me. It feels like one perfect day when there aren't any worries and nothing can go wrong."

"That sounds really nice." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"It is." Ares said with a smile, then asked, "What did you want?"

"Oh. We were just wondering if you'd like to help us with anchoring the Vinculum Chamber and the barriers so that they won't drift over time." Agent Roberts carefully explained.

"I don't know how much help I'll be, but if there's something I can do, I'll be happy to do it." Ares said honestly.

"From the way I understand it, we just need for you to represent one of the Houses of the Zodiac so that the anchor can be made through you. As far as I know, you won't actually have to do much of anything except maybe stand in a certain place or say a few words."

"Is there any danger involved in this? I have quite a few people who depend on me." Ares quietly explained.

"No. No danger." Mr. Hansen assured him.

After a glance at Dark and receiving a nod, Ares quietly asked, "What do I have to do?"

"Just let Filipe put a spell on you to make you one with the astrological sign of Aries."

"Okay. Whenever you're ready." Ares said simply.

"I can see the path behind, filled with memories and great rewards. I can see the path ahead, filled with new adventures and exploration. What has been and what will be are united in this invisible point, this incalculable time and place. This nothing, this everything, is Aries." Filipe said as he made a rapid series of complicated gestures.

"Wow. You're getting kind of deep there, Filipe." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"Yeah. Aries is like that." Filipe said simply, then turned to Dark and asked, "Do you want to be Cancer?"

"Um, sure."

"As was, so is. Now and forever. Cancer." Filipe said as he formed four hand signs in succession.

"That's it?" Agent Roberts asked confusedly.

"Uh huh. Each House is their own thing." Filipe explained, then looked to Dark and asked, "Is that okay?"

Dark laughed a full deep belly-laugh, then said, "That's perfect! I love it!"

Although Filipe was certain that there was something that he was missing in the interaction, he had no clue of what it was. Just as happy to let it go, he turned his attention back to his companions.

"You are performing beyond my expectations. I didn't realize that you had such an in depth understanding of astrology." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"I don't really." Filipe hesitantly admitted, then explained, "When I was taking regular classes in a regular school, I had to learn times tables. When I was doing it, I didn't have to understand how or why they worked, I just had to memorize them."

"While I admit that I don't closely follow the academic practices of the mundane world, I thought that they had moved away from teaching by rote and were presenting beginning math in a more algebraic form."

"I guess it depends on the school. The one I went to was... poor. I don't mean in quality as much as I mean the people who go there don't have much money. I think my teachers were great. They did as much as they could with what they had to work with. But sometimes we had to share books or use copied charts and graphs from books that we couldn't afford to get for everyone." Filipe quietly explained.

"It sounds to me like Filipe learned how to memorize things that he didn't understand at the time. Maybe that's a good skill to have, since it's turned out to be so useful." Agent Roberts suggested.

"Yes. While memorization by rote doesn't necessarily help with understanding, it can be a benefit in and of itself." Mr. Hansen agreed.

"Who's next?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Deimos or Jim. Whichever you'd like to do first." Mr. Hansen said frankly.

"Um, neither." Filipe reluctantly responded.

"How's that?" Mr. Hansen asked curiously.

"They each have an 'other' who needs to be included in their spelling. Doing either of them without their 'other' would make their spelling incomplete." Filipe fought to explain.

"So you're looking at the assignment of astrological roles to the people present as being part of a bigger spell rather than individual spells being cast?" Mr. Hansen cautiously asked.

"If you think about it, this is part of casting the barrier spell. We've been casting this spell ever since the first barrier came down. When we didn't automatically do what was supposed to happen next, it was revealed to us... well, to Paul. Him and his father are probably the only ones here who can sense the movement of the Vinculum in relation to the rest of the multiverse." Filipe said thoughtfully.

"Then why didn't V notice it first? I assume that he's more powerful than Paul by at least an order of magnitude." Agent Roberts quietly asked.

"Probably because V isn't actively casting the spell. He's helping out here and there, but he's not up to his neck in the casting of it like some of the rest of us." Filipe said thoughtfully.

"I think he's right. This spell that we're performing... it was written long ago, by beings that might no longer exist..."

"Or they might exist outside our time and space." Filipe suggested.

"Yes. This could have been orchestrated by a being outside our ability to perceive or conceive. All of this which is so grand and complex to us might be no more consequential than a comma in the course of a sentence that they were writing in an epic that we will never know of." Mr. Hansen said distantly.

"You're getting kind of poetic there, Dag. Want to pull it back? Conrad's back with the boys, so we can get this done." Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yes. Of course." Mr. Hansen chuckled, then turned to Filipe and asked, "Do you want to ask them?"

"Yeah." Filipe immediately agreed, then turned toward the nearer of the twins and asked, "You're Deimos, right?"

"Yes." Deimos responded warily.

"If you guys are up to it, we could use your help." Filipe said seriously.

Deimos looked around and noticed that Tannis and Cain had joined them.

"All of us?" Deimos asked cautiously.

"Yes. If you wanted, you and your brother could represent the astrological sign of Gemini."

"Both of us?" Cain asked to be sure.

"Yes. Just like your dad was chosen to represent Aries because his name is Ares, you two are chosen to represent Gemini because you're twins."

"Will it hurt?" Cain asked cautiously.

"Nope. I'll cast a spell on you and then you might have to stand in a certain place and speak a few lines if we end up doing a full ceremony." Filipe said frankly.

The twins looked at each other in unison, then seemed to reach simultaneous agreement as they both looked at Filipe and nodded.

"Into the world, eyes wide open. Into the world, ears uncovered. Into the world, tongues unleashed. Into the world, Gemini." Filipe said as he formed symbols before each of the twins in turn.

"That's it?" Cain asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. That's it." Filipe confirmed.

"I don't feel anything." Deimos said frankly.

"I could kick you or something, if you wanted." Filipe weakly offered.

"No. That's alright." Deimos chuckled.

"Who wants to go next?" Filipe asked as he looked at the older and younger brother, side by side.

"Do you want to?" The older brother asked quietly.

"Yeah." The younger one answered with a smile.

"Could you do your transforming thing, where you turn into a faun? It'll make this easier." Filipe asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Just give me a second. I'm not as good as everyone else at this." Tannis said as he started weaving hand signs.

"That's fine. I didn't know you could do any magic besides your transformation." Filipe said honestly.

"I've been practicing forever and this is all I can do." Tannis admitted, then as soon as he was finished, he began to transform.

Tannis' clothes faded away and seemed to be absorbed into his body as his more animal features came to the fore.

Filipe smiled at the boy's little buds of horns, then started his incantation.

"Virtue exists in completion. History favors those who follow through. Thus Capricorn."

"You okay?" Jim asked his brother quietly.

"Yeah. That was fun." Tannis giggled.

"Are you ready?" Filipe asked the next boy in line, then quickly added, "It will only take a second."

After transforming into a centaur, Jim answered, "Yeah. Go ahead."

"That which is the center. Joyous and fun-loving. In opposition and in harmony, your existence is sacred. Sagittarius." Filipe said as he made three simple bold symbols before Jim's chest.

"That's it. We've got them all now." Agent Roberts said happily.

"No. There's still one more." Filipe said cautiously.

"We've done twelve people haven't we?"

"Yes. But Cain and Deimos were both imbued with the identity of Gemini." Mr. Hansen confirmed.

"Oh. Right. Then who do we have left?"

"Pisces." Filipe immediately answered.

"That's the fish, isn't it? What does Pisces do?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"You see, that's the problem. I don't think the description applies to anyone here, and it's such that if it did, I wouldn't have any way of knowing. I don't know any of these people in those terms." Mr. Hansen said uncomfortably.

"How bad is it? Lay it on me." Agent Roberts demanded.

"Pisces are... romantic. They're highly imaginative and sometimes it's said that they're more style than substance because they tend to cloak themselves in illusions."

"Does it *have to* be a flesh and blood person? I mean, can Obby do it?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"I... I don't know. Let me think it through." Mr. Hansen said uncertainly.

"Do you think what Mr. Hansen said sounds like it's Obby?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Well, yeah. Romantic, imaginative and cloaked in illusion... all that's missing is a picture of him." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"He is able to walk away from you by his own free will, isn't he?" Mr. Hansen slowly asked.

"Yes. At least, right now he can. We can't be sure what capabilities he's going to have when the barrier spells are complete." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Actually, that shouldn't matter. If it did, all the participants would have to be immortal for the anchor spell to be maintained." Mr. Hansen said thoughtfully.

"So, can he do it?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I *believe* so. If Filipe can imbue him with the identity of Pisces, then I don't foresee any problems with the anchoring ceremony." Mr. Hansen said more confidently.

"What do you say Obby? Do you want to help us out?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked toward the floor.

The blackness of his shadow began to thicken before welling and rising up at his side. As everyone watched, the vaguely humanoid fluidic black goo transformed itself into an exact, albeit darker, replica of Agent Roberts.

"I wasn't paying too close of attention. What did you need for me to do?" Obby asked curiously.

"We're going to be doing a ceremony to anchor the room that we're in and the barriers in place, so that they won't drift over time. To do that, we have to get a group of people to take on the identities of the different astrological signs. If you'll agree to it, we'll put a spell on you to make you an avatar of Pisces. You become a representation of Pisces and it becomes part of who you are." Agent Roberts carefully explained.

"Is that what you were talking to all those people for?" Obby asked curiously.

"Yes. If you agree, you'll be the thirteenth person that we sign up for it."

"So I'll be doing something just like twelve real people?"

"I guess so. If you want to look at it that way. You weren't chosen because you're a shadow, you were chosen because you have the personality traits of a Pisces."

"Thank you, Shawn. I can't even tell you how much it means to me to know that you look at me as someone who can contribute. Yes. I'd like to do it." Obby said shyly.

"Filipe, are you ready to do one more?" Agent Roberts asked optimistically.

"I'm ready to try." Filipe said with a smile, then turned slightly to face Obby.

With grim certainty, Obby met his gaze.

"This I state: Personification of love, personification of life, eldritch horror beyond the reach of what is known. This I request: Imbue within this being the essence of what it is to be Pisces. This I give: My power and my will for it to be so. Make it be." Filipe said firmly, then finished his incantation with one long-held hand symbol.

"Was that a heavy-duty spell or what?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I didn't want for there to be any doubt. If it sticks, we're good. If it didn't, then we don't need to try it again. That was the absolute best that I could have done it." Filipe said frankly.

"Oh. Okay. Good job." Agent Roberts said, not seeing any reason not to take the boy at his word.

"What do I need to do now?" Obby asked excitedly.

"Just be ready to help us when you're called upon. From the way I understand it, the ceremony that we'll be doing is kind of a free-form thing and we can't really be sure of how it's going to end up. It might take some time, so stay available." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Actually, there's no reason to delay and several very good reasons to make haste." Mr. Hansen said firmly.

"Okay. Just let us know what we need to do." Agent Roberts said immediately.

"Let me join with the earth for a moment to clear my vision and identify all the anchors, then I'll know what steps need to be taken next." Mr. Hansen said seriously.

"I'll watch out for you while you're doing that." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"Within the purity of the element, my vision becomes clear. I see the pillars that serve as a foundation. Further I see the origin and formation. In so doing, I see the points where what has been created can be made secure, withstanding the torrents and tides, stresses and streams of the multiverse." Mr. Hansen slowly muttered to himself.

Agent Roberts watched and waited for something to happen.

"I see...." Mr. Hansen said more loudly.

Agent Roberts was sorely tempted to ask him just what it was that he was seeing, but knew better than to interrupt.

"I see..." Mr. Hansen said again, then began walking.

Agent Roberts, Obby and Filipe followed along, not knowing just what it was that they were supposed to be doing.

Finally, Mr. Hansen stopped and seemed to be looking at Warren without seeing him.

"Thus the avatar be enjoined. Pay heed and follow the entreaties of Leo."

"Um, what?" Warren asked, then looked at Agent Roberts inquiringly.

"I think Dag's saying that if you feel like going over there and standing by the door, you should do it. Don't fight it." Agent Roberts quietly explained.

"I made you part of Leo. Mr. Hansen brought you into the spell. The rest of it should happen on its own as long as you don't fight against it too much." Filipe said seriously.

"Hi. I'm Obby. I'm going to be helping people just like you are!" Obby said proudly.

"What *are* you?" Warren asked as he stared at the solid black figure before him.

"Milo said that I'm a shadow demon, even though I'm not a demon at all, not even a little bit. I promise." Obby explained.

"It's just a name, Obby. No one judges you by it." Agent Roberts assured him, then added, "And besides that, so far all the demons that I've met have been pretty cool."

"But *what* are you?" Warren persisted.

"He's a shadow... my shadow, to be precise. And thanks to Milo and a little magical overflow from the barrier project, Obby is here with us, solid and able to speak." Agent Roberts finished with a smile.

"Your *shadow* came alive?" Warren asked dubiously.

"Yeah. We've got to follow Dag around right now, but catch us later and Obby might do some shadow tricks for you." Agent Roberts said before hurrying to follow where Mr. Hansen had gone.

* * * * *

"Did Dag just cast a spell on you two?" Agent Roberts asked quickly as he approached.

"I don't know. He said something about joining avatars and entrails and stuff." Kirwin said confusedly.

"That young man seems to be a bit..." Steven faltered.

"Out of his freaking mind?" Agent Roberts suggested.

"Yes." Steven reluctantly agreed, then added, "Although I'm sure he has only the best intentions."

"Dag's a good guy. He's just a little... enthusiastic at the moment."

"Are you going to be part of helping everyone too?" Obby asked excitedly.

"Yeah. Does that mean that you're going to be part of the spell?" Kirwin asked curiously.

"Yes. Obby has been made Pisces, so he's going to stand alongside both of you."

"For some reason I thought this was something just for the regular people." Kirwin said frankly.

"From the way that I understood it, the only people who are disqualified are the Magi and the ones who are actively casting the spells... well, there's V too, but that's just because he's so powerful that he might hijack the whole spell without meaning to." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Shouldn't we be following Mr. Hansen?" Filipe cautiously asked.

"He's right there, talking to Linnaeus and Den. From the look on their faces, I'm guessing that he's speaking to them in a language that neither of them comprehend." Agent Roberts said speculatively.

"Shouldn't we go and help him?"

"If he needed or wanted our help, he could ask us. And while I don't actually have a problem chasing after him doing damage control, I really don't see the point. If someone can't figure it out, I'm sure they'll ask someone more knowledgeable." Agent Roberts explained.

"But what Mr. Hansen is doing right now is part of the anchor spell. Aren't we supposed to be helping him?" Filipe asked anxiously.

"According to who... whom... whatever. I'll help when I know what I'm supposed to do, but right now, standing here with all of you is just about as productive as anything else that I can think of at the moment." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"If I'm done with my part, I should probably get back to casting the Southseid barrier." Filipe said honestly.

"Do you want to take a break for a couple minutes before you get back to the grind?" Agent Roberts asked gently.

"No. It's not fair to leave Dr. Williams and Professor Everstone with all the spellcasting. I'd rather do my part." Filipe said solidly.

"That's a good attitude to have. It will serve you well in life." Agent Roberts said as he impulsively pulled Filipe into a quick hug.

"What you think about me is important to me. Thanks for saying it." Filipe said as he returned the hug.

"We'll talk more later. Go on." Agent Roberts said as he released Filipe.

Filipe smiled at him, then hurried away.

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"What do we need to do now?" Kirwin asked cautiously.

Agent Roberts turned his attention back to Kirwin, then said, "I think it's best if you listen to your instincts and impulses for the next little bit. I'm not sure how all of it works, but the whole astrological thing seems to kind of work by itself as long as you don't try to overthink it."

"I don't notice feeling any particular urges at the moment." Steven said frankly as he noticed Warren joining them.

"I'm not sure how or when it's going to happen. In fact, I can't be sure *if* it's going to happen. I was just told that you should be ready for it and not fight it." Agent Roberts told the group.

"That boy, G, is trying to get your attention." Obby quietly interrupted.

Agent Roberts noticed where Obby was looking and said, "That's not G, that's Lex, he's an illusion that G made."

"So he's a not-real person like me?" Obby asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I suppose that he is in some ways, but since he came to be in a completely different way, there are some ways that he isn't." Agent Roberts tried to explain.

"I think he wants to talk to you about something."

Agent Roberts thought for a moment, then quietly asked, "Would you go over there and talk to him for me?"

"What do you want me to say to him?" Obby asked cautiously.

"Just talk to him and find out what he needs. If it's something that I can help with, then you can come and get me." Agent Roberts said seriously.

"I'll do it, but I don't understand why." Obby said honestly.

"To be honest, I don't understand why either. Maybe it has something to do with the two of you having things in common, or maybe you have an answer for him that I don't."

"Okay. I'll talk to him." Obby said slowly before walking away.

"Your shadow is its own person." Steven stated more than asked.

"More and more every day." Agent Roberts confirmed.

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"You were motioning to Shawn. He sent me over here to see what you needed. My name is Obby."

"Hi. I'm Lex. They just got to a part of the spell where they don't need my help. I've got a question about something and since it's about G's dad and since Paul's busy with his own stuff, I thought that maybe Agent Roberts could help me decide what to do." Lex said anxiously.

"If you really want for me to go get Shawn, I'll do it right now. But he sent me over here to see if maybe I could help you. I think he

thinks that since we're the same in some ways that maybe I'll be able to help you somehow that he can't."

"Like how?" Lex asked curiously.

"I don't know. Maybe because I can understand what you're feeling when you talk about being 'made' instead of 'born'." Obby said frankly.

"Actually, that does have something to do with it." Lex said quietly.

"Well, I'm here if you want to talk about it. Believe it or not, shadows are *really* good at listening." Obby finished with a smile.

Lex smiled at that, then responded, "I was just thinking about what I'm going to do if I keep existing after the barrier spell and all of that is over."

"What do you *want* to do?" Obby asked curiously.

"That's what I wanted to talk to Agent Roberts about. I couldn't really talk to G's dad because it'd be like me asking him to adopt me or take me in or something."

"Would it be *bad* if he wanted to adopt you?" Obby asked curiously.

"No! It'd be wonderful! It'd be the best thing ever. But I wouldn't want him to do it because he felt like he had to and didn't have a choice. The only way it would be right is if it was because he wanted me to be his son."

"So what did you want for Shawn to do?"

"I thought that maybe he could come up with some other ideas about what I can do when the barrier spell is over. I mean, where can I go? How can I live? Will I even want to keep existing?" Lex finished quietly.

"I've thought about some stuff like that, but not exactly the same."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lex cautiously asked.

"No. But I will. Maybe it will help." Obby said simply, then continued, "I don't have to worry about not existing when everything is all over. If all the magic suddenly stopped, I'd just go back to being Shawn's shadow. I don't know if I'd still be me... I mean, if I'd know that I was me. But there's not anything I can do about it either way, so I'm not too worried about it."

"But what are you going to do? How are you going to live if you keep on being like you are now?"

"I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it. I always thought that I'd go back to being a flat shadow when I wasn't doing things. If I had to be 'real' all the time... I could probably live with Shawn. He has a big house and lives there all by himself. We get along great. I think he'd probably like to have someone else around."

"But what if G's dad doesn't want me there? What could I do then?"

"Hold on." Obby said, then turned to walk away.

"But I'm not done!" Lex called after him.

"I'll be right back. Just hold on." Obby said again, then hurried back across the room.

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"Was it something important?" Agent Roberts asked when he saw Obby approaching.

"Yeah. He's trying to figure out what he's going to do if he keeps on existing when the barrier spells are over." Obby explained.

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing yet. I don't even know if I'm going to still exist. I don't want to make a promise that I can't keep." Obby said honestly.

"Good. I'm glad that you're being level headed in all this." Agent Roberts said seriously, then fell silent.

Obby waited anxiously for Shawn to come up with some brilliant idea to make everything all better.

"It sounds to me like there are several things that we're not sure of at this point. We don't know how D and Beth are going to react. For that matter, we can't even be sure of what G and Paul are going to do."

Obby slowly nodded his agreement to the assessment.

"How about this? Why don't we just tell Lex that no matter how anyone else feels, he can stay with us at our house?"

"*Our* house?" Obby asked to confirm.

"Yeah. I just naturally assumed that you'd be staying with me... at least until Otis steals you away." Agent Roberts finished with a tender teasing grin.

"I might visit Otis on our days off sometimes, but I plan on staying with you for as long as you want me around." Obby said frankly.

"*Our* days off? Do you plan on working with me?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Yeah. I think we'll be a great team. Besides that, you know that if I'm around I've always got your back."

"I guess that's true." Agent Roberts chuckled, then became more serious as he said, "Go tell Lex that he will have a place with us. If he ends up staying with D and Beth, we'll be happy for him, but if things end up not working out, he won't ever have to worry about being left all on his own."

"Thanks Shawn! I love you!" Obby said as he hugged Agent Roberts enthusiastically.

"I love you, too." Agent Roberts quietly admitted as he gently returned the hug.

At some point Obby must have decided that the hug was over because he enthusiastically bounded away, back toward Lex.

"You're a good person, Obby. Don't ever change." Agent Roberts said as he watched with a distant smile.

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"Shawn said that you can live with us!" Obby happily announced.

"Oh, uh... thank you." Lex said reluctantly.

"Don't you want to? It'll be great! I bet we'll have all kinds of fun together!" Obby urged him to understand.

After a moment of examining Obby's hopeful expression, Lex finally responded, "We probably *will* have fun together. But I was just hoping that Agent Roberts would talk to G's dad about letting me stay with them."

"No. Shawn wouldn't do that to you." Obby said seriously, then continued, "If what G's dad says is going to mean anything at all, you're going to have to be the one to ask him about it. Shawn or Paul or G or even me asking him wouldn't be the same. Just remember that no matter what he says, you'll have a place to stay and people who will want you."

"I don't know when I'll get a chance to talk to him about it..." Lex began to say, but was interrupted.

"Lex! We're about to start the next push!" Corabeth called out.

"Okay. I'll be right there." Lex automatically called back.

Obby watched with concern as Lex hurried away.

* * * * *

"Mr. Hansen? Are you about ready with that? Because we're not too far from tying this thing off." Paul called out from the table where the Magi were working.

"Hold on for just another minute if you can. I need to see where everyone is in relation to where they need to be." Mr. Hansen responded.

"All you Zodiac people, if you feel any urge to move to another part of the room, now would be the best time to do it." Agent Roberts announced.

A few questioning looks flashed amongst the group but the only ones to move were Kirwin, closer to his grandfather's side and Cain, to take a step closer to his brother.

"Unbeknownst to the actors, the words unsaid and the songs unsung, the play has been enacted. Thus the universe maintains what is and what should be. Tis done." Mr. Hansen called in a booming voice.

"What? Seriously? That's it?" Agent Roberts asked toward Agent Fastbeck.

"Did you ever wonder why mundane people don't believe that there really are witches?" Agent Fastbeck responded.

"Yeah. But all that buildup and production for a two second speech? How does that work?" Agent Roberts asked aloud, to whomever was listening.

"The ceremony *was* the point. The buildup and production were component parts of the actual spell. The two second speech was just the little bow on top to pull it all together." Mr. Hansen explained.

"So, it's done? There's no big fireworks or complicated spells or anything left to do?" Agent Roberts asked to be sure.

"You've seen all that there is to see." Mr. Hansen assured him, then quickly added, "I need to get back to Jarrell. I don't want to leave him on his own with the cherubs for too long."

"That sounds like a good idea. I'll keep an eye on things around here while you're doing that. Go ahead." Agent Roberts assured him.

He watched as Mr. Hansen joined Mr. Couleigh and the cherubs in their spellcasting.

"So, does that mean that we don't have to do anything else to help?" Obby asked as he approached.

"You don't have to do anything else to anchor the barriers, but you might be able to help in other ways." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"I thought I was going to get to do something important to help people." Obby said in an obviously disappointed voice.

"Even though you didn't get to do anything big and flashy, you still helped. And I don't know if you've thought of this, but thanks to the spell that Filipe cast on you, he slightly altered who and what you are."

"I don't understand." Obby said honestly.

"When you look at who and what you are, you wear several different labels. Most of those you didn't get a choice in. Some you did. What Filipe did was give you a whole new label which you can wear proudly."

"I'm Pisces, an avatar of the astrological house." Obby said thoughtfully.

"Right. And it's completely up to you if you want to wear that label proudly and do something with it or just ignore it like it never happened."

"I don't really know what it means to 'be Pisces'." Obby reluctantly admitted.

"To be honest, neither do I." Agent Roberts told him with a smile, then continued, "But I think that we've made a few really good friends recently who might be able to help you find out about that."

"Yeah. If I can find out what it means, then I can try to be the best Pisces that there ever was."

"As long as you're willing to put in the work, I'll be right behind you to support you, however you need me."

"Thanks Shawn. I don't know much about it, but I think that maybe I'm the luckiest shadow in the world."

"I don't know either. You may be."

* * * * *

"The weave is done! All the barriers have been intertwined." Paul announced triumphantly.

"So that's it? You're finished?" Agent Roberts asked uncertainly.

"No. The Magi are still releasing the stored magic for the barrier creation, but we've finished weaving together the loci." Milo patiently explained.

"But that's easy compared to the weaving. We don't have to do much more than let it happen." Paul helpfully added.

"We are also responsible for the regulation of flow so as not to overwhelm the spellcasters." Reaper reminded his companions.

"Pfft." Paul responded with a slight roll of his eyes.

"One cannot refute a well reasoned argument such as that." Reaper said with an affectionate grin at Paul.

"Didn't you used to have trouble with our language?" Agent Roberts asked Reaper curiously.

"I gain language skills the longer I am exposed to a person or group of people." Reaper calmly explained.

"I just remember talking to you and getting more understanding from your nonverbal cues than from your words." Agent Roberts said with a fond smile at the memory.

"It was during that time that we found understanding between us. We didn't have words getting in the way of what we were trying to say to each other."

"You know, when all of this is done, I'm still going to be stationed in Waxell. I'll be able to stop by the Protectorate and visit every now and then."

"I believe we would all like that."

"Good. Then it sounds like we have a plan."

"I hope you're planning to keep in touch with us too." Paul interjected.

"From the way things are looking, I might not need to. I think we're going to end up with shared custody of Lex, which means that we'll be seeing each other all the time."

"What about Lex?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I get the feeling that he's uncertain about what's going to happen to him when the barrier spells are all finished."

"Since he was conjured to cast the Brynnhollow barrier spell, I would guess that he will automatically terminate when the spell does." Paul said slowly.

"When the 'casting' ends, or when the 'barrier' ends?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Oh..." Paul quietly responded.

"How likely is it that you just made an immortal creature who is capable of spellcasting?"

"Me? I didn't do it! This was completely G!" Paul was quick to point out.

"I was using 'you' in the plural sense to include both you and your brother."

"Oh, okay." Paul said quietly, then cautiously asked, "Have you ever heard of a Sylph?"

"No. I can't say that I have." Agent Roberts slowly answered.

"It's an air spirit, sometimes called a sprite."

"Okay." Agent Roberts slowly responded

"Despite how it manifested, I think that might actually be what G created."

"Okay." Agent Roberts responded again.

"Sylphs are pure elemental spirits and they're usually not too friendly toward people."

"Are Sylphs always created by accident, being the leftover byproduct of someone else's pet project?"

"I don't know... maybe. I haven't read too much about them." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"Well, if that's the case, I can see why they might not want to play nice with you. If I were them, I wouldn't want to be a party to you condemning someone else to the same fate, either."

"You have no proof that that's what happened."

"True. But I don't know if you're seeing the severity of what your reactions will mean to Lex." Agent Roberts said frankly, then explained, "No matter how your family looks at him, it's how he looks at himself that has the potential to be the most devastating. To find out that he's unwanted or a mistake might be too much for him to bear."

"But there's still a chance that he'll stop existing when the spellcasting of the barrier ends." Paul quickly interjected.

"I'm not arguing that. What I'm saying is that it's horrible and wrong that anyone would wish for that outcome for him. Maybe it's just me being a silly human... I admit that I don't know as much as you do about the secret realities of the world."

"I don't know about that. But I think I understand what you're saying about Lex... or at least I'm beginning to."

"Good. Then I'll let you get back to the business of saving the world and all of that." Agent Roberts said with a teasing smile.

"Not the *whole* world, just a few special parts of it." Paul responded with enough of a smile to let Agent Roberts know that they were good.

* * * * *

"Agent Fastbeck? Can you open the Southseid door for us? I believe that we're going to need every advantage toward harmonization that we can muster for this next part." Professor Everstone asked suddenly.

"Yes. Of course." Agent Fastbeck said quickly as he rushed toward the Southseid archway and called out, "*In the name of Cernunnos who oversees and protects, accept the guardians of light into your sanctuary.*"

"Agent Roberts, it looks like we're going to need that too." Miss Oaken hurriedly called.

Before even taking a step, Agent Roberts began saying, "*In the name of the horned god of the animals, I humbly ask that we be granted entry to this, your sanctuary. We are the harbingers of the next age.*"

Without asking or being told, Archdruid Highley began walking toward the Nevermore doorway as he calmly said, "*In the days of tribute, in the months of seeing, in the years of trial, in the centuries of pain, we persevere. I humbly ask that you grant entry to one who serves. I am the keeper.*"

"Do you want for me to tell Otis to open the Waxell door too?" Obby quietly asked.

"It might be better to ask V. I'm not sure if opening the door would make things better or worse for what he's trying to do." Agent Roberts responded with a smile.

Obby seemed to 'go flat' into a pool at Agent Roberts' feet, then stretched across the room, as though Shawn had been cast in a spotlight.

Once the shadow reached V, it separated from Agent Roberts and began to form into a three-dimensional being. Agent Roberts had to admit that not only was it a visually interesting method of travel, but it also seemed to be quite a bit faster than walking.

"The magic, it's slowing down. Is that what's supposed to be happening?" Ares asked with concern.

"I have no idea. I'll have to ask." Agent Roberts responded, then turned toward the group of spellcasters and asked, "Is the magic supposed to be drying up?"

"Yes and no. We're at the end of the barrier and finishing things up, but it's not us who are reducing the magical flow. Talk to the Magi." D said quickly before turning his full concentration back to the barrier spell.

"Paul? Is your magic faltering or are you intentionally bringing it down?" Agent Roberts asked, having to fight himself not to step away from the doorway.

"Some of both. Mr. Bentley Brown seems to be slipping, but everyone feels like they're just about done anyway. It looks like it might be a race to the finish." Paul said with difficulty as he was obviously struggling to maintain the magical flow.

"Mr. Bentley Brown? Is there anything I can do to help you? Is there anything you need?" Agent Roberts asked anxiously.

"Yes. As much as I hate to admit it, I need someone to physically support me. If you can find someone who can just help me to hold the chalice, I believe that I will be able to finish doing what has been asked of me." Mr. Bentley Brown carefully said.

"Does it have to be a witch?" Agent Roberts asked sharply.

"No. Anyone will do." Mr. Bentley Brown assured him.

"Obby! I've got a job for you!" Agent Roberts called loudly.

"I'm right here! Do you need me for something?" Obby asked from Otis' side.

"Yes. I need for you to help Mr. Bentley Brown. Help him to keep the magic flowing until the barrier spells are complete." Agent Roberts called loudly across the room to him.

"If you've got someone to spare, I could use some help too." G reluctantly admitted.

"Lex? You got this?" Agent Roberts called immediately.

"They need my help casting the spell." Lex responded uncertainly.

"We can compensate. Go help G." D said decisively.

"How's everyone doing? Zanner? Do you need any help?" Agent Roberts thought to ask.

"Naw. I could do this all day." Zanner said contentedly.

"Anyone else?" Agent Roberts called more loudly.

"We're just about to pull this thing into the station, making sure to tie up the last little bits and bobs. We wouldn't want for those who follow behind us to have reason to criticize our professionalism." Professor Everstone announced.

"The seal!" Milo suddenly gasped.

"Oh fuck! Why didn't anyone warn us about that?!" Paul whined.

"Such an event should have been foreseen when it was discovered that the magic of the gods had been employed." Reaper said regretfully.

"What is it? What's going on?" Agent Roberts cautiously asked.

"The seal to end the spell and tie everything together, it's a life price." Paul said gravely.

"Someone has to die to finish the spell?" Agent Roberts asked with astonishment.

"It would seem so. Without the sacrifice, the spell will not be ended and the barriers could be amended at any time by anyone with the slightest magical ability." Reaper quietly explained.

"What can we do?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously, dreading the answer.

"Abandon the project, forsaking everything we've done to date, or give it the sacrifice that it demands. Those are our options." Professor Everstone said simply.

"What are you going to do?"

"What are you going to allow me to do? Considering the situation that we're in, I won't do *anything* without the FBI's sanction."

"I know what my knee-jerk reaction is, but at the same time, I don't want to lose everything that we've worked so hard to achieve."

"Maybe this is what I was really created for." Lex said as he released G's hands holding the Mikael Spear and took a step toward the table of the Magi.

"What?" G asked in surprise.

"I know that you didn't create me to be sacrificed, but still, maybe this is why I'm here. This could be my entire purpose for being." Lex carefully explained.

"No." Obby said firmly as he moved forward to stand eye-to-eye with the teenage looking illusion.

Lex found himself speechless in astonishment as he stared at the shadow before him.

"I won't stand by and let anyone else sacrifice themselves. I couldn't live with myself if I did." Obby said firmly.

"Neither one of you are going to sacrifice yourself. You can't. You're not alive." Professor Everstone said firmly to stop the back and forth.

Obby and Lex both looked at the Professor with matching wounded expressions.

"What I mean to say is that you aren't alive in a way that can be used to satisfy the conditions of the spell." Professor Everstone hurried to explain.

"Then I suppose it falls to us." Agent Fastbeck said simply, accepting the Professor's announcement at face value.

Agent Roberts nodded his agreement without hesitation.

"Part of our job is to protect the civilians who pay our salary, sometimes that goes so far as paying the ultimate price." Agent Fastbeck explained, mostly toward Otis and the Tennyson family, to

let it be known that they would not be asked to sacrifice themselves.

"Hold on Conrad. You've got Andrea and the boys to watch out for. They need you." Agent Roberts said quietly, doing his best to sound emotionless and detached.

"No. I'm your supervisor. There's no way..." Agent Fastbeck began to say, but was interrupted.

"None of you will have to sacrifice yourselves!" Milo fought to say loudly enough to be heard.

"Don't even think about it Milo. Even though there are times that you're a colossal pain in the ass, there's no way we're going to let you kill yourself so just get that thought right out of your head." Agent Roberts said firmly.

"Actually, I wasn't planning on it. My choir of shades is a collection of disembodied human souls. When they were alive, they were completely devoted to the archdruid and to Nevermore. Upon their deaths, I preserved a shred of each of them in hopes that they could resolve their past issues and find the redemption that they were unable to achieve in life. I know that they would be honored to give this last little bit of themselves up in order to protect the children of angels as well as all of you." Milo explained.

"Will they know what's happening to them?" Obby asked into the silence that followed as he looked at the collection of shadows with concern.

"I doubt it, but I will do everything that I can to convey that what they're doing is going to be for a good cause." Milo fought to impart calmly.

"They're your friends, aren't they? Your family." Jhaartael asked quietly.

"During my darkest hours, they filled a void. It's only right that I now release them so that they can find their peace. In a way, this

will be me keeping my promise to them." Milo explained to his father.

"So, what do we still have to do to finish this off?" V asked seriously.

"I believe that if everyone will join me in making a final push to complete the various spells that we have outstanding, that Milo will be able to make his sacrifice and bring the whole thing to conclusion." Professor Everstone said calmly and rationally.

"No one has to die?" Obby asked in confusion.

"No. Everyone gets to have a long happy life." Agent Roberts assured him as he pulled Obby into a hug.

"Do you think G's dad saw what Lex did?" Obby quickly asked.

"I'm sure that he did." Agent Roberts assured him, then added more quietly, "We've let Lex know that we support him and that he won't be left on his own. Now the rest is up to him."

"But shouldn't we do something to let G's dad know what Lex is worried about?" Obby asked with concern.

"We've done as much as we can do. Lex will have to take care of the rest of it himself." Agent Roberts quietly explained.

"I don't know if I can just do nothing while Lex is so worried and scared." Obby said as he pulled out of the hug.

"Why don't you go over and see how Otis and the Tennysons are doing? I need to stay by the Brynnhollow door."

"Do you want me to tell them anything from you?"

"No. Just find out how they're doing and let me know if there's anything I can do to help them."

"Okay. I love you Shawn." Obby said happily before scurrying away.

"I love you too." Agent Roberts said quietly after him with a slight affectionate smile.

* * * * *

"Mister Ingram, are you able to determine for yourself when the sacrifice will need to be made?" Professor Everstone asked seriously.

"My name is Miklos Szabla and as long as I'm attuned to the Magi, I am capable of tracking the progress of all the other spells." Milo said confidently.

"Does that include the anchor spell that Mr. Hansen did?" Professor Everstone asked cautiously.

"Yes. Not only did I see what he was doing, but I also verified that he did it correctly. There is no doubt, the Vinculum is securely anchored and when the barriers are complete, they will be also." Milo confirmed.

"I am sure that Dr. Williams and Filipe will be as glad to have this over with as I will be. The Southseid barrier team is ready to seal their barrier spell. We're waiting on notice of the other teams being likewise prepared."

"The Nevermore team is ready. The Protectorate barrier has been remade and is awaiting confirmation before proceeding with completion." Mr. Hansen said soberly alongside Mr. Couleigh and the cherubs.

"Lex, if G can do without you for a minute, we could really use your help to finish this off." D said from between Miss Oaken and Corabeth.

"Are you okay?" Lex asked G to be sure.

"Yeah. You'll help me out most by ending this." G said as he struggled to maintain his grip on the Mikael Spear.

As soon as Lex was physically at D's side, between him and Corabeth, Miss Oaken called aloud, "This barrier, this illusion, this inheritance from ages past, become the home and hearth, succor

and solace of our precious loved ones in the future, passed unto the descendants of the Brynn!"

There was a long silent moment as her words hung in the air, then as they were beginning to fade, Professor Everstone loudly said, "The protected society, the isolated community becoming a world unto itself, a civilization apart, perhaps one day discovering the secrets that have eluded their neighbors. In this, we offer protection from those who would cause you harm. My kindred fellows, the Wudewas, with all that we are and all that we have, we wish you well."

Again, there was a moment for the words to sink in. Finally, Mr. Hansen said in a clear firm voice, "In defense of history, in defense of myth, in defense of truths which best remain unknown for the time being, We reinstall the barrier that not only protects but also limits. In this we show our love, our respect and confirm that these people have value to the world."

When the invocation was complete, Reaper quietly whispered, "Thank you."

"So it is done. The barriers have been made. What were three have now become one. Each being stronger and having more features to protect our precious ones." Paul said to the group.

"We have used the magic left for us, expressly for this purpose. It is our hope that we will be judged to have used it wisely." Reaper said, using Paul's same tone and inflection.

"All that is left is to make the seal so that no *one* can undo what we have done. To that end and with this spell I call upon the powers that be, the forces that guide the universe and most specifically upon Cernunnos, the Horned God of Animals, to witness this spell and offer their wishes that it be so." Milo said in an increasing voice.

"Do it." Jhaartael whispered to his son anxiously.

"So I form the seal and let the magics be done." Milo said in a voice of finality.

"Let what has been created here be allowed to remain." Reaper said next.

"By the will of witches, demons, faeries and angels, let it be so." Paul intoned with finality.

Agent Roberts' eyes tracked to a movement and he saw the members of Milo's choir stirring, as though they were being thrashed by a wind that only they could feel.

Within seconds, the shadows began flowing, one by one, toward the table where the Magi had been working.

As each arrived, Milo would look at them sadly and silently mouth a word or two before releasing them to experience the next expression of their death.

After the last of the shadows had been dispatched, Agent Roberts broke the silence by quietly asking, "Is that it? Are we done?"

"For the most part, yes." Professor Everstone wearily answered.

"I still have to go back to the Protectorate and fold it out of our space." Mr. Hansen said unenthusiastically.

"Don't worry. Filipe and I will go along to help you." Mr. Couleigh promised.

"If you'll show me a little of what you do, maybe I could do some of it myself." Filipe quickly suggested.

"Are you sure that you're up to it?" Mr. Hansen asked with a tender smile.

"I'm up to trying. I just want to be some help, if I can." Filipe explained sincerely.

Mr. Hansen turned his attention mainly toward Professor Everstone and asked, "Is there anything else that you need us here for?"

After a moment to consider, Professor Everstone finally answered, "No I believe that all has been resolved."

"What about *them*?" Mr. Couleigh asked as he tilted his head in the direction of the cherubs.

"I have no use for them. Reaper?" Professor Everstone finally asked.

"Summoned, you came and fulfilled your vow of loyalty to my father and his word. I declare before all that you have completed your task to my satisfaction. Go in peace." Reaper said slowly and formally.

"Filthy animals!" One of the cherubs spat before hurling itself through the Nevermore archway. The other soon followed.

"Good riddance." Mr. Couleigh said after them.

"They did what they were called upon to do. What more would you ask?" Reaper asked curiously.

"Some civility would be nice." Mr. Couleigh immediately responded.

"Yes. Wouldn't it though." Reaper said wistfully, then smiled at Mr. Couleigh with his corpse-like face.

Agent Roberts' attention was drawn by Miss Oaken and Corabeth speaking rather urgently with Warren and his family.

"Is there a problem?" Agent Roberts asked as he approached the gathering.

"No. We were just asking if they had functioning 'facilities' in the house." Miss Oaken asked uncomfortably.

"Oh." Agent Roberts said with surprise, then turned to Warren and asked, "Do you?"

"Yes. Kirwin is saying goodbye to his new friends, then he's going to conduct them to the house. When he's ready, I'll help my dad back to his car." Warren explained.

"Are you sorry that we drew you into all this?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"I can see now, whether knowingly or not, that I've been dodging this all of my life. Now that I'm in on the big secret... I can see why my ancestors made the pact. This is something that our family can be proud of."

"So you don't mind that Kirwin's a part of it?"

"No. Absolutely not. He's doing something important. Although I probably won't ever take much of an active role in all of this, I won't have any problem with cheering for my father or my son from the sidelines."

"Come on!" Kirwin quickly said as he passed by on his way from the group surrounding V.

Miss Oaken and Corabeth immediately followed without comment.

Agent Roberts took that opportunity to excuse himself and move to where V and the Brynnhollow boys were gathered.

"So, is there anything else that you need to do while you're here?" Agent Roberts asked V as he approached.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" V asked playfully, his tone of voice revealing that he didn't believe it to be so.

"No. I was just curious to know if you had something else that you wanted to accomplish while you're here."

"When things settle a bit more, I'd like to have a few minutes to talk with my son. No matter how much time we end up having, I doubt that it will ever feel like it's enough. Even so, there are one or two things that I feel must be said." V said frankly.

"He has a good family that loves him. Just don't get in the way of that." Agent Roberts cautioned.

"Just because I'm a demon doesn't mean that I would intentionally undermine my own son's happiness." V said firmly.

"This has nothing to do with you being a demon. I'm just making sure that you're aware of something that could hurt your son. In trying to make up for lost time, don't do things to diminish what he already has."

"It's good that my son has people who will watch after his best interests. It's better than I would have dreamed for him."

"Do you want to see what we learned how to do?" The youngest of the boys asked suddenly.

Agent Roberts couldn't help but smile, since it was obvious that Tannis had held back his question until he simply couldn't contain it any longer.

"What have you learned?" Agent Roberts asked indulgently.

"Remember that you're inside. Don't make it too big." V cautioned.

Agent Roberts was surprised to note that Xaphan moved to V's side, as if to take part in the judging of the boys' performances.

"Look." Tannis said happily, then did a series of abrupt hand gestures.

Although Agent Roberts wasn't a witch and had no training in witchcraft whatsoever, he had seen enough to know that the hand gestures needed to be performed with more precision and grace.

Apparently, what Tannis did turned out to be good enough because the result was what appeared to be a little knot of weeds growing into a ball in his open palm.

"Tannis doesn't have a fire ability, so I did my best to teach him some of the earth lore, insofar as I am familiar with it."

"Agent Roberts, put your hand up." Tannis said quickly.

Although reluctant to do so, Agent Roberts finally acceded to the boy's demand.

In the space of a heartbeat, a small thin vine shot out of the ball in Tannis' hand and wrapped itself around Agent Roberts' wrist.

"That's really something." Agent Roberts said as he automatically fought to disentangle himself.

"V says that it won't let loose of you until I tell it to." Tannis said happily.

"Would you get it to let loose of me now?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"Yeah." Tannis said, and as he did, the vine fell away.

"Jim and Deimos? Do you want to show Agent Roberts what you've learned before he has to move on to something else?" V asked warmly.

"Xaphan taught us this." Deimos said as he held up one hand and his fingertips seemed to spew forth flames.

"That's a Yan-gant-y-tan fire spell that even *I* didn't know. And while it might not look like all that much on the surface, it's an incredibly versatile spell. I'm sure that they'll have many occasions to use it." V said frankly.

"I can't show you my spell. It's kinda gross." Cain said regretfully.

"Yes. But once you've been able to refine your gift with practice, you may well end up with a more versatile gift than your brother or your friends. It will be up to you to make it happen." V said sagely.

"Deimos doesn't have to work for it." Cain grumbled.

"Yes. And that makes it all the more likely that he will not progress much beyond the point where he finds himself right now."

"It looks like Paul is breaking away from the Magi. This might be a good chance for you to get to talk to him."

"Thank you, Agent Roberts. I appreciate all your help." V said quickly before hurrying to his son's side.

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"Have you got a minute?" Lex asked nervously.

"Yeah. I'm finished here. What can I do for you?" D asked curiously.

"The spell is over and I'm still here." Lex said simply.

"Do you want me to ask G to end it?" D guessed.

"No! I want to keep on living... I just... what do I do now?" Lex finished in a small lost tone.

"It looks like Paul and V are having a little heart-to-heart talk right now. How about when they're done, we get G and Paul together and discuss what we want to do next?"

"Agent Roberts and Obby already said that I can live with them if you don't want me at your house." Lex hurried to explain.

"Just hold on and we'll talk about it."

* * * * *

"Are you going to tell me that you're going to have to leave?" Paul asked reluctantly.

"You know that I can't stay." V regretfully responded.

"Yeah. I know."

"I'm proud of you Paul. I wish that I could have been a part of your life up to now, but things weren't fated to be that way."

"I understand... well, most of it. I know about what happened and that Mom had to make some decisions while she still could. I don't know if she was right or wrong for doing it, but either way, I get that she was trying to do the right thing as she understood it."

"Mah Zah and Ginh Zah can get messages to me if you ever need to get ahold of me that way." V quietly told him.

"I might do that if I need something important. But I don't think I'll be sending regular messages with them."

"Oh. I see."

"I'm going to wait until I can make a fully traversable portal for myself, then I'll go and visit you and tell you all that stuff in person."

"You have your mother's talent for portals?"

"I have some of it. I'm not sure what hers is really like. She hasn't used it around me very much. But either way, as soon as I've learned a little more and have gotten a little stronger with my magic, I should be able to go and visit you whenever I want."

"I'll look forward to that time." V said peacefully.

"I'm really glad that I got to meet you. I wish we could visit longer, but it looks like everyone is getting ready to go."

"We've said what needs to be said for now. I'll look forward to your visit. When that day comes, we'll have a feast and we can tell each other long stories." V finished with a chuckle.

"I probably won't be able to eat your food. We'll have to wait and see how that works out. But as for the rest of it, I can't wait." Paul finished with a smile.

V pulled Paul into a firm hug which he held for a long loving minute before finally letting go.

As Paul watched, V walked to Agent Roberts and after a brief incantation, the Brynnhollow door transformed into a breathtaking hellscape view of the Meayithan Realm.

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After seeing V off, Agent Roberts decided to walk around and take stock of how everyone else was doing.

"Are you going to be alright to get back to your cars on your own? Are you going to need a guide?" Agent Roberts asked with concern.

"I feel confident that we will be able to make it back to your home safely." Professor Everstone said warmly.

"If you're sure. I wouldn't want to take the chance of anyone getting lost at this stage of things."

"We will be fine." Professor Everstone said confidently.

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts?"

"Yes?"

"You're going to be staying in Waxell, aren't you?" Ares asked cautiously.

"Yes. As far as I know."

"Good. Once things have settled down, I'd like it very much if you'd come to visit. After everything that we've been through, I wouldn't want for us to lose the bonds that we've formed... and the kids really look up to you. I think it'd be great if you were around for that, too."

"You want for me to be an example for your kids?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I just think it's good for them to have a role model from outside Brynnhollow to give them a sense of perspective about the whole thing." Ares said simply.

"Isn't Conrad already doing that?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I can't really say. I just know that the kids want to learn new things and do their best to impress you. I'd like to encourage that." Ares said frankly.

"That's good enough for me. Just let me know when and I'll be there." Agent Roberts happily agreed.

* * * * *

"Did you need me for something?" Paul asked as he approached.

"Yes. In just a second. You're brother just had one last thing to say to Mr. Bentley Brown before he leaves."

"How's it going, Lex? Are you getting along okay?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yes. I think so. I'm just not sure about what to do next." Lex said quietly.

"Eat, drink, sleep, relax, do whatever else you need to do to make up for all the stress of today." Paul said frankly.

"What did you need me for?" G asked as he bounded over to his father and brother.

"Lex was just wondering what's going to happen to him now that the spell is over." D said simply.

"Okay." G said hesitantly.

"You're the one who created him, so he's your responsibility. I'll help you with the decisions that you'll be making, but you'll have to be the one to make them." D said seriously.

"Are you saying that I just made you a grandfather?" G asked his father uncertainly.

"I've got a newborn at home, I'm not quite ready for that." D chuckled, then continued, "But it's important for us to decide right now where Lex stands as part of our family."

"I don't know what you're asking me. Do you want for me to move out and get a job so that I can support him?" G asked uncertainly, obviously not believing it to be so.

"Is Lex my son, my grandson, is he a he or an it? Does he get his own room or share yours? When we get back to the house, does he get his own car, or does he borrow one of yours?" D asked seriously.

"Yeah. You said that you were getting us cars for our birthdays, didn't you?" Paul said happily.

"So, guys, tell me honestly, where does Lex stand in our family?"

"I can go live with Agent Roberts and Obby if it's going to be too much trouble for you." Lex quickly interjected.

"No way." Paul immediately responded.

D smiled at his son's reaction, then said, "Lex, we all want for you to be part of our family. We're just trying to figure out *which* part."

"If G doesn't want you to stay in his room, you can stay in mine... well, except that I'm usually over at G's anyway." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Or you can come over to my room and hang out with me and Paul. We wouldn't mind you being there." G offered.

"Would that be okay?" Lex asked Paul uncertainly.

"Yeah. It'll be great. Especially if you'll side with me when we vote about which anime to watch next. Some of those things are really awful."

"Paul, would you have any problem with losing the view of the back yard from your bedroom window?"

"I have a view?"

"I'll take that as a no."

"Are you saying that you're going to adopt me?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Yes. In some sense of the word. Although I don't plan on going before a judge again anytime soon if I don't absolutely have to."

"But are you sure that you want me living with your family?" Lex asked uncertainly.

"Of course." D answered dismissively, then asked, "What's your full name?"

"Lexington." Lex cautiously answered.

"That's it?" D asked to be sure.

"Yes. Paul said..." Lex began to say, but was interrupted.

"Okay. So Lexington is a fine first name. I have no problem with that." D said thoughtfully.

"Okay." Lex haltingly agreed.

"Of course your last name is going to be Darroch, so that way there's no doubt that you're part of our family."

Lex's eyes began to fill with tears as a smile spread across his face.

"And as your father-to-be, I'm going to exercise my prerogative to choose your middle name." D continued.

Lex was speechless and could only nod his agreement.

"Tamhas, after my uncle. Lexington Tamhas Darroch. What do you think about that?" D asked with a smile of accomplishment.

"I love it! It's great!" Lex said as his tears freely fell.

"Good. Then let's get things wrapped up so that we can get out of here. I'm hungry and I need some sleep."

"Do you have your car?"

"I have a rental."

"Which door did you come through to get here?" Paul asked curiously.

"That one, the one that goes to the haunted house." D said as he pointed.

"If you've got room for all of us, we can go whenever you want. G and I know the way to Agent Roberts' house, so there's nothing holding us back." Paul said frankly.

"Let's just make sure that no one needs us for anything else, and then we can go."

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts?" D asked as he approached, followed by G, Lex, Paul and a variety of lesser demons.

"Yes?"

"If you don't have anything else for us to do, we're about to be on our way." D said frankly.

"I think we're all good here." Agent Roberts said honestly, then looked past D and quietly asked, "How did things work out for you, Lex?"

"D said that I could be like his son and live with him." Lex said shyly.

"Lex, you call me 'Dad'." D said firmly to his newest son, then added more gently, "And you aren't going to be 'like' my son. You 'are' my son."

"Okay... Dad." Lex said past the mile-wide grin that he couldn't suppress.

"If you're going back to the house, I'll see you there in a little while. Obby and I are probably going to be hanging around here until everyone has found their way to wherever they're going. Since I

can open all the doorways, it makes sense if I'm the last one to leave."

"So you don't mind us being at your house?" D asked to verify.

"No. I don't mind at all. But you should be aware that I don't have any food. If you're hungry, you might want to get some food along the way."

"Do you think that diner in Waxell is still open?" D asked cautiously.

"No. And I doubt that the market is either. You'll probably need to go into Gooseneck or Grover's Station." Agent Roberts said regretfully.

"I suppose that we'll do what we have to do." D said unenthusiastically.

"I can get Warren or Otis to go with you if you like. They know the area better than I do." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"I know it well enough from my previous visit. Don't worry, we'll see you back at the house. If anyone else asks, we'll be bringing food enough for everyone, so they won't have to worry about it." D finished with a smile.

"Good thinking. I'll be sure to let them know."

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Milo?" Agent Roberts asked quietly.

"I did okay, didn't I?" Milo asked cautiously.

"Yes. Absolutely. You did great!" Agent Roberts assured him, then quietly added, "I just wanted to be sure that you're going to be okay."

"Yeah. I should be." Milo cautiously responded, then added, "I'm about to take my dad back to my place so that we can visit for a while."

"That sounds great. I'll leave you guys to it." Agent Roberts said with a smile, then made sure to add, "You can get in touch with me at the Waxell FBI field office if you ever need me for anything at all."

"That's good to know. Thanks." Milo said appreciatively, then quickly added, "You know where to find me if you ever need me."

"That's right. And don't be surprised if I come to visit through the Vinculum Chamber, too."

"Oh yeah. I didn't think about you using that after the barrier spells are over." Milo said honestly.

"I think that Agent Fastbeck and I will probably be keeping tabs on how things are going at all three colonies. That would seem to be the fastest and easiest way for us to visit all of them."

"Yes. That makes sense." Milo easily agreed.

"Besides all of that, I'm pretty sure that Obby is going to want to stop by for visits."

"Both of you will always be welcome." Milo assured him.

"Good. Then I'll leave you to your dad. I hope you have a good visit." Agent Roberts finished pleasantly.

"Thank you."

* * * * *

Linnaeus and Den made a point of saying goodbye to everyone in the chamber before finally exiting with Reaper through the Nevermore doorway.

"Are you about ready to pack it in?" Agent Fastbeck asked as he approached.

"Yes. As soon as you and Rhuru-wra have finished, all that will be left is to close the doors of the Vinculum. Do you want to stop by my house for a debrief with everyone after you're done here?"

"Not unless you really need me for something. I'd rather spend some time with Andrea and the people of Brynnhollow so I can answer whatever questions they might have."

"That's probably for the best. If anything of concern to you comes up at the debriefing, I'll pass it on to you when I see you at work."

"So, are you sorry yet that you accepted the transfer to the Waxell office?"

"Dealing with all the strangeness can be a little challenging, but getting to know all the different people from completely different societies makes it more than worth it. I honestly think that we have some of the best jobs in the world."

* * * * *

As Agent Roberts walked up to his car, a voice asked, "Do you feel like talking?"

Looking where the voice had come from, Agent Roberts could barely begin to make out the shape of a man.

"I can leave you alone if you need time to think." Obby quickly offered.

"No. That's fine. I might need some quiet time later, but I think I'd rather have some company right now."

"I can still talk." Obby said happily.

"I noticed. I'm not sure why that is, but I'm not unhappy about it." Agent Roberts said before climbing into the driver's side of his car.

He unlocked the passenger door from the control panel on his own door, then got comfortable while Obby got into the passenger seat.

"I thought you'd be with Otis."

"He left with Warren. I wanted to go with you." Obby said casually.

Agent Roberts nodded that he had heard.

Once Agent Roberts had started the car, Obby quietly asked, "Are you okay with me and Otis?"

"Of course." Agent Roberts said without hesitation.

"You don't think Milo's mad at me about it, do you?" Obby asked anxiously.

"I seriously doubt it. If he had any desire to have an exclusive relationship with you, I'm sure that he would have said something about it before this."

"Good. I didn't think he was, but I can't always tell how people are feeling just by looking at them."

"It takes practice." Agent Roberts assured him.

"You're still a lot better at it than I am. Thanks for letting me ask you about it." Obby said gratefully.

"What about you and Lex? What's going on there?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"We're friends... I think you meant for that to happen, from the way you asked me to talk to him." Obby finished speculatively.

"I thought that since you two had things in common that you might get along." Agent Roberts admitted.

"But Lex is interested in that girl... Corabeth. And he looks like he's a lot younger than me. I couldn't ever think of him like I think about Otis. That would be creepy." Obby said thoughtfully.

"You're probably right." Agent Roberts easily agreed.

* * * * *

"Shawn?" Obby asked into the silence that had fallen over the car.

"Hmm?" Agent Roberts responded.

"Now that the barriers are fixed and everyone's going back home, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. But considering the way things have gone so far, it wouldn't surprise me if another adventure turned up fairly soon."

The End

Book 4: na Beatha

Chapter 57

"*Hello?*"

"Matt?"

"*Yes. Who is this?*"

"Agent Roberts... Shawn. I told you that I'd get back to you once I had a few other things worked out. I wasn't sure when would be the best time to catch you."

"*Are you going to be able to make it? It's day after tomorrow, in the afternoon.*"

"Yes. In fact, I've already cleared it to have the time off, so barring an emergency, I should be able to make it. What time would you like for me to be there?"

"*Everyone's going to show up around one in the afternoon, but... I mean, if you wanted, you could stop by a little earlier and we could... I don't know... hang out and stuff.*"

"How does eleven sound?"

"*Really? I mean yeah. That'd be great! Do you already know where it is?*"

"Yes. Unless you've moved since the investigation."

"*No. I'm still in the same place.*"

"Good. I'll see you then."

"*Thank you Shawn. I can't even tell you how much this means to me.*"

"Thursday, at eleven, just the two of us, we'll talk." Shawn said in a low sultry voice.

There was a pause, possibly a gulp, then Matt hoarsely responded, "*Yeah*."

* * * * *

Shawn sat for a long silent moment staring at the ancient rotary dial phone on the side table beside his favorite armchair.

"Wanna talk about it?" A voice asked from no specific place.

Rather than play dumb, Shawn quietly answered, "There's not much to talk about. He invited me to celebrate his birthday with him and I said that I'd go."

Shawn's shadow emerged from the wall and became more or less solid as it said, "I know how hard it is for you to put yourself out there and risk being hurt. You're doing the right thing."

"Obby, I don't understand how you can be part of me and be so different at the same time. You make it seem easy. The way you started relationships with Milo and Otis seemed almost effortless."

"Yeah. Well, what I have with the guys is fun. This thing with you and Matthew... it could be for keeps. It's worth it to take the time to do it right." Obby said with concern.

"So, you don't think that you could have a *real* lasting relationship with 'the guys'?" Shawn asked curiously.

"I didn't say that." Obby said firmly, then explained more gently, "I don't know if I have a better or worse chance than you at finding 'true love'. But what I *do* know is that if Otis or Milo found someone else to be with, and if I knew that they'd be happy, then I'd be happy for them. I have a feeling that if this thing with Matthew goes the way that you want it to, that it would devastate you if he found someone else. You'd be completely gutted."

"Do you think I'm making a mistake?"

"No! This is *exactly* what you need to be doing. In fact, it's probably a few years past when you should have started the search for a mate."

"A *mate*?" Shawn chuckled.

"Yes." Obby said firmly, not having any of it. "You need a mate, a *soul* mate. Everything up to now has been in preparation for what you're doing right now. I mean, why build up a fantastic life if you're not going to share it with someone?"

"Well, excuse me if I don't take life advice from a shadow." Shawn grouched.

"I may be *just* a shadow, but according to my scorecard, I'm getting a lot more action than you are. I must be doing something right." Obby said frankly.

After a moment to consider, Shawn finally said, "Sorry Obby. I know that what you're telling me is good advice. I guess I'm just reluctant to try new things."

"You're doing fine. And I'll be right there if you need my help with anything." Obby assured him.

"Yeah. I guess that's probably a good thing."

"Yep. That way I'll be there, ready to jump in, if you screw it up with Matthew." Obby said with a grin.

"Hey! You said you knew how much it would hurt me if we didn't work out."

"I promise that I won't try to sabotage it or steal him away from you, but if he's suddenly up for grabs, I'm grabbing."

"That's very *mercenary* of you."

"I'm just trying to be honest. As long as you commit to your decisions and put in the work, I won't ever get a chance with him."

"I'll hold you to that." Shawn said humorlessly.

"You *have* been warned." Obby said firmly before walking face first into the nearest wall and dissolving into a normal looking shadow.

* * * * *

The sound of the phone startled Shawn out of his thoughtless staring out of the living room window.

He listened carefully for the ring pattern. Once he had determined that the call was for him, he picked up the phone and said, "Agent Roberts."

"*Shawn? I wasn't sure that I was going to be able to get through. The phone system there must be insane. Am I catching you at a bad time?"*

"No. Actually, it's the perfect time. I'm just sitting and relaxing for a few minutes after work."

There was a long silence which prompted Shawn to ask, "Shelly? Are you still there?"

"*What? Oh, yeah. I was just trying to imagine what that would be like, to just sit and relax... it sounds like heaven.*"

"Are Mom and Dad on your case again?" Shawn asked sympathetically.

"*Again? Try still! They've never let up for even a minute. Here I am studying for my board certification exam and they're both doing their damnedest to ramp the stress up to eleven. They're relentless.*"

"Shell, you need to stop. This is killing you." Shawn said firmly.

"*That's easy for you to say. You're not here. I can't just stop.*"

"Pretty soon you're not going to get a choice in the matter. Either you'll stop or you'll *be* stopped. You *can't* keep going like this."

"*That's not what Mom and Dad say.*" Michelle said knowingly.

"Shell, have you ever heard of 'do as I say, not as I do'?" Shawn asked his sister bluntly.

"*It's occurred to me that neither of them ever really accomplished all that much in their professional lives.*"

"Right. Listen. What I've figured out is that Dad just backs up Mom. We could disappear off the face of the earth and he wouldn't notice if Mom weren't there to harp and nag at him about it. Mom is the one who blames *her* parents for not pushing *her* hard enough. So she pushes Dad to push us, rather than take responsibility for her own failure and lack of ambition and for not marrying better. Shell, don't let their disfunction destroy you. It serves no purpose." Shawn implored his sister to understand.

"I wouldn't know where to start." Michelle hesitantly whispered.

"Well, if you need a clean break you can come here and stay with me for a while." Shawn easily suggested.

"I can't. I have to take my board certification exam."

"You do what you have to do, Shell. I'm just trying to get you to realize that with Mom and Dad *nothing* will ever be good enough. *Nothing* will ever be fast enough. And there is no possible way that you will ever, in a million years, get them to say that you've done enough to suit them. You're chasing an impossible dream."

"I have to take my board certifications..."

"Okay. But I can see how close to the edge you are. The minute that it gets to be too much, come to Waxell and stay with me for a while."

"I can't. I've got to..."

"I know. Just keep it in mind. I even have a spare room, just for you."

"Thanks Shawnie, I probably won't end up doing it, but knowing that you have a place for me really means a lot."

"I'll always have a place for you." Shawn immediately assured her, then firmly added, "And don't call me Shawnie."

* * * * *

Shawn walked into his kitchen and immediately turned the oven on, to get it preheating. As he washed the clods of dirt off a large potato, he considered if it might not have been better for him to go to the Waxell Diner.

In the end he concluded, as he had more and more often as of late, that even though the cost of eating out every night was not at all prohibitive, he had reached a point in his life where he was ready to take on a bit more responsibility for his own well-being and be a bit more self-sufficient.

Once his potato had been thoroughly cleaned, he poked it several times with a fork and slathered it with grease before wrapping it in foil and putting it in the oven.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Obby asked from over his shoulder.

"No. I've kind of got this timed out to do it myself, but I wouldn't mind it if you kept me company." Shawn easily answered.

"I don't know how good of company I'll be, but I don't mind hanging around."

"Have you been missing Milo and Otis?" Shawn asked curiously as he mechanically worked at cleaning and chopping fresh vegetables for a salad.

"No. Not yet." Obby easily answered, then explained, "It's nice to be with the guys when they're around, but I don't really miss them all that much when I'm on my own. I actually expected to miss them more."

"Well, I suppose it's good that you're not heartbroken, pining for your lost loves." Shawn said with a quick smile at him.

"It's like, we had what we had, then it was over. There's always a chance that we'll have something else later, but if we don't, we don't." Obby said frankly.

"I have a feeling that my relationship with Matt... if there ends up being one, isn't going to be quite as casual as that." Shawn reluctantly admitted.

"Well, duh! You're jumping into this thing heart first. If it works out, it's going to be epic!" Obby said happily

"And if it doesn't?" Shawn cautiously asked.

"Then it doesn't." Obby said simply before explaining, "It'll hurt like hell and you'll probably still be stinging from it in a few years from now, but you'll survive."

"Any idea of how I can keep from having to go through all of that?"

"Sure. That's an easy one. If you're too afraid of the pain, then don't put your whole heart on the line. Of course, doing it that way, you're probably not going to find the deep emotional connection that you've been looking for. It'll be nice and safe for your fragile little feelings." Obby finished with a teasing grin.

"Ouch! No mercy!" Shawn said as he fought to contain a smile.

"You don't need mercy. You need a kick in the ass so you don't puss out and screw up this thing with Matthew." Obby said firmly.

"I guess you're right. It's not like I'm trying to get out of it. I'm just not very experienced with dating and..."

"That whole goofy awkward thing you've got going on, I'm pretty sure that Matthew will think it's adorable. Don't let your training kick in and make you try to pretend that you're confident or in control. Just be yourself. Let him accept or reject the *real* you. If you do that, then no matter how things end up going, you'll have no regrets."

"How did my shadow attain such wisdom?" Shawn chuckled as he took out a big bowl, then started placing the prepared salad ingredients in it

"Remember what I am."

"A shadow?"

"A repository for everything that you couldn't deal with or chose to ignore."

"What does that make me?"

"One lucky son of a bitch."

* * * * *

Obby was mostly silent as he watched Shawn take out a cast iron skillet, then meticulously adjust the flame to be sure that it would achieve the absolute perfect cooking temperature.

"I never thought to ask before, do you eat?" Shawn asked curiously.

"I never have, but I'm not sure if I *can* or not." Obby answered slowly.

"Do you want to try? I can cook you your own little steak if you want." Shawn offered.

"I wouldn't want to take a chance of wasting the food. But if you wouldn't mind, I could try a bite of yours and see if I'm able to eat it. If I can, then maybe I could have my own plate next time." Obby said thoughtfully.

"Okay. But if you decide that you're starving all of a sudden, don't expect for me to split my food with you. You'll just have to remember that you had your chance." Shawn cautioned.

"I'm not Michelle." Obby said bluntly.

"Oh, you caught that reference, huh?" Shawn chuckled.

"I don't remember every little detail about your life. Honestly, most of the time I just wasn't that interested. But I know the basics, and that includes the fact that you'd have to take double portions of dinner for yourself because Michelle would say that she wasn't hungry, then end up eating half of yours." Obby explained.

"I did whatever I could to make her happy." Shawn said in his defense.

"You did fine."

* * * * *

An abrupt knock on the door was a complete surprise to Shawn. He looked down at the steak in the skillet then toward the door with indecision.

"I can watch this, if you want." Obby hesitantly offered.

"Do you know how to cook?"

"I don't even know how to eat. Just tell me what to do."

"Right. Okay, um, just give it about two more minutes, then pull it off the heat. According to what Conrad said, that's good for meat. It likes to rest for a few minutes after it's been cooked." Shawn said before another, slightly louder, knock at the door sounded.

"I've got this. Go ahead." Obby assured him.

* * * * *

Shawn peeked out the door and was surprised to see Gil Spencer standing on his porch.

After cautiously opening the door, Shawn hesitantly asked, "What can I do for you today, Gil?"

"We did an early pick of the raspberries and ended up with more than we needed. There's not enough to bother with canning, so Nancy thought that you might enjoy them." Gil said simply as he held up a large jar full of raspberries swimming in syrup.

Before Shawn could think of how to respond to the completely unexpected act of kindness, Gil continued, "She knows that you're busy with your job and probably don't have a lot of time to do extra cooking, so she made a simple sponge cake to go with it."

"Thank you. That's incredibly kind of you." Shawn finally blurted out in astonishment.

Gil's stern facade broke to reveal a slight grin as he said more quietly, "You should be able to get a few good desserts out of this."

"I really appreciate it. Thank you." Shawn said as he accepted the jar and square cake pan covered with foil.

"It smells like you've got dinner cooking. I'll let you get back to it." Gil said with the slightest smile before turning to leave.

"Yeah. Thanks again. Please thank Nancy for me." Shawn hurried to say as Gil slowly walked away.

Rather than answer verbally, Gil raised one arm in a gesture that acknowledged his receipt of the message.

As soon as Gil crested the rise, Shawn went back into the house.

* * * * *

"Is everything alright?" Obby asked from his position in front of the stove.

"Yes. Gil just brought us some raspberries and sponge cake for dessert tonight." Shawn said with a smile.

"Us?" Obby asked curiously.

"We were talking about you trying to eat something. This sounds like a pretty good thing for you to try." Shawn said frankly.

"It *does* look good." Obby reluctantly admitted.

"Would you like to have dinner in the breakfast room?"

"Yeah. That sounds nice." Obby answered with a smile.

"If you'll take the dessert on in, I'll follow you with dinner." Shawn said as he handed the dessert to Obby.

"I'm still not sure if I'll be able to eat." Obby cautioned him.

"It's not a problem. We'll make the best of it, no matter how it turns out." Shawn said as he started gathering plates and silverware onto a tray.

"Okay. Thanks Shawn." Obby said with renewed enthusiasm as he hurried away.

Shawn smiled tenderly after him, amazed at how content he was with his life.

* * * * *

"Here you go. I hope this doesn't end up hurting you somehow." Shawn said as he carefully cut a piece off his steak and placed it on a separate plate.

"Do you think we should talk to Milo about it before I try?" Obby asked uncertainly.

"I wouldn't want for you to be hurt. But I'll back you up no matter what you decide." Shawn said seriously.

After a moment to consider, Obby broke into a grin, then said, "You only live once."

"With everything we've been through, I wouldn't count too much on that." Shawn said with a smile.

"Yeah. Between the vampires and witches, they've probably come up with some kind of a work-around for that." Obby chuckled.

Shawn cut a piece of steak for himself, then took a bite as he looked out the window into the woods surrounding his house.

"Is it good?" Obby cautiously asked.

"Yeah." Shawn responded.

"Good... I wouldn't want to try doing this with something that tastes like ass." Obby said as he looked down at the steak uncertainly.

"So, if it tastes good but it hurts you, it'll still somehow be worth it?" Shawn asked curiously.

"Maybe. It depends on how good it is." Obby said thoughtfully.

"It's *really* good. I'll let you decide what you're going to do." Shawn said before taking another bite.

Obby considered a moment longer, then began to cut a small piece of the meat.

"Make sure that you get enough to taste. If you only get one shot at this, make it count." Shawn cautioned him.

"Yeah." Obby nervously agreed, then slowly lifted the piece of steak to his mouth.

Shawn slightly nodded his encouragement.

Obby finally took the plunge and put the steak into his mouth.

Shawn watched silently as Obby chewed.

"How is it?" Shawn asked cautiously.

"I don't know yet. Give me a minute." Obby said around his mouthful.

Shawn nodded again and waited, trying to make sense out of the expressions flitting across Obby's face.

Finally, Obby quietly said, "It's like I can feel my taste buds coming alive for the first time ever. I'm not sure exactly what it is that I'm tasting, I just know that I love it."

"I'm glad. You had me worried for a second." Shawn admitted with a relieved smile.

"It had me worried, too. At first I couldn't tell if I liked it or not. The sensation was so... overpowering that I wasn't sure if I was tasting or hurting or being eaten away from the inside out." Obby quietly confessed.

"Do you want to try a bite of my baked potato?" Shawn offered warmly.

"Could you save me a bite? I want to have some more steak and get used to what I'm tasting before I try anything else." Obby said carefully

"Yeah. I can do that." Shawn said as he immediately cut a piece off his baked potato, being sure to get enough butter and sour cream so that Obby would be able to taste all of it.

"I never really thought about what people got out of eating. I mean, I knew that there was something good about it, but I never even imagined that it felt as good as this."

"There's a whole world of foods for you to experience. But make sure that you take time to enjoy them. You're probably going to become desensitized to them over time, so make the best out of the time that you have." Shawn explained before taking another bite of his steak.

"What do you think would happen if I tried to go flat right now?" Obby asked curiously.

"Go outside if you're going to be trying anything like that because I'm guessing that when you go flat, the food inside you won't." Shawn said frankly.

"I guess that makes sense." Obby said cautiously.

"Ready for the potato?" Shawn asked with a grin.

"Yeah. I think so." Obby said happily.

Shawn shifted the bite of potato that he had carefully carved earlier to Obby's plate.

"Thanks for doing all of this for me Shawn. I'm pretty sure that I'm the luckiest shadow in the world." Obby said quietly.

"I have no doubt that you're lucky among shadows, but I'm pretty sure that you might also be considered as lucky among 'people'."

Obby put the bite of baked potato into his mouth and slowly chewed as he thought about Shawn's words.

After carefully considering, Obby slowly said, "I know that what you're saying is true, but I'm not sure how I feel about it. I mean, it seems wrong to be happy with where I am and what I've got when I know that there are people who don't have as much."

"That's a pretty big subject that we can discuss in depth some other time. Just try to keep in mind that being miserable because the world isn't fair doesn't help anyone. No one is happier because you're miserable and those people you're concerned about aren't one bit better off than if you were happy." Shawn carefully explained.

"I hadn't thought about that."

"Besides that, if they turn out to be the type of people who would rejoice in other people's misery, then why would you want to do anything for their sake anyway?" Shawn asked grimly.

"I'm not saying that I *do* want to, but at the same time, I won't allow someone else's bad behavior to dictate whether or not I'm going to do what I believe is right." Obby said firmly.

"So you're saying that you would offer someone a kindness simply because it's the right thing to do, and not because you think they somehow deserve it?" Shawn asked curiously.

"Yeah. Well, within reason. I'm not stupid." Obby assured him.

"Even so, I think you may be a better person than I am." Shawn said thoughtfully.

"Neither of us is better. We're on the same side. There will probably be times when my way is right and other times when yours is. In fact, there will probably even be some times when *neither* way of thinking turns out to be right." Obby stated with certainty.

Shawn smiled at the response, then noticed Obby's empty plate and asked, "Are you hungry for more? We've still got salad."

"I'm still not sure what the whole 'full' and 'hungry' thing is. I don't think that I can feel that but I know what you're asking and I don't think I want any more right now." Obby said seriously.

"Are you still going to want to try the raspberries and cake?" Shawn asked before taking another bite.

"Oh yeah, I wanna try that. I've been watching you and other people enjoying desserts so much over the years that I want to see what all the fuss is about. I can't even imagine how good it must be for how everyone seems to go on and on about it."

"I hope that you won't be disappointed." Shawn said frankly.

"Wouldn't that be funny? I'm trying my first dessert ever and it turns out that Mrs. Spencer's raspberries just plain suck?" Obby asked with a chuckle.

"Well, since I've never tasted Nancy's berries before, I can't say that that won't happen. But the casserole that she sent over was wonderful, so I would *expect* for her dessert to be just as good." Shawn said honestly.

"That was nice of her. And it was nice of her husband to bring the stuff all the way over here. We should really do something nice for them." Obby said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Except that I don't know what we could do. There's nothing that I could make that would compare to Nancy's cooking." Shawn said before gathering up the last bite of food onto his fork.

"We'll just have to think about it. There must be something nice that we can do for them." Obby persisted.

"Let's save any decisions on that until after we've tried the raspberries. Are you ready for dessert?" Shawn asked with a smile.

"Yeah."

* * * * *

Obby was surprised when Shawn stood up and walked out of the room.

Before he could ask what was going on, Shawn returned with dessert plates and clean silverware.

"If we're going to do this, we might as well do it right." Shawn explained as he moved their dinner plates out of the way.

"I've never understood the point of something like this before. Using the 'special' plates or eating in a 'special' room always seemed kind of pointless to me. Now... I'm glad that you show your appreciation and gratitude for the gifts that you've been given by showing respect. It feels to me like it's the right way to do things."

"To be honest, I've never really thought about it before. I suppose you're right. Doing anything less *would* seem disrespectful to me." Shawn admitted, then asked, "How big of a portion would you like?"

"Well, from everything I've seen, I'm probably going to really like it, so why don't you give me the same size portion that you give yourself?" Obby asked thoughtfully.

"Coming right up." Shawn said as he lifted the foil off the square cake pan.

"Can I taste some of that without the raspberries? That looks like it might be good by itself."

"Sure. But cake by itself can be a little dry. Why don't I get us some milk to go with dessert?"

"Okay. Yeah. I want to try that too... I want to try everything." Obby said with a growing smile of realization.

"I'm afraid that we'll have to save the everything for later. But we can do the milk right now. Why don't you cut us some cake while I get that?"

"Okay." Obby happily agreed.

* * * * *

When Shawn returned to the breakfast room, he stopped in the doorway and smiled at the sight of Obby, sitting and staring at the piece of cake on the dessert plate before him.

"Go ahead and try some. You don't have to wait for me." Shawn said as he continued on into the room and placed the small glasses of milk on the table.

"This is kind of a big thing for me. I feel like sharing it with you." Obby said as he carefully cut a small piece of cake with the edge of his fork.

Shawn thought about that for a moment as he watched Obby carefully take a bite of the cake.

After a few long seconds of indecision, a glorious smile crossed Obby's face.

"Go ahead. Try the raspberries." Shawn encouraged.

Obby took the top off the jar, then carefully drizzled the raspberries and syrup over his sponge cake.

"Save some for me." Shawn teased.

"I don't know. If this tastes as good as it looks, there might not be enough here for both of us." Obby said as he carefully handed the jar to Shawn.

Shawn smiled as he poured the raspberries over his own cake.

"Ready?" Obby asked excitedly, with his fork poised in hand, ready to pounce.

"You don't have to wait for me." Shawn reminded him.

"This is part of the whole 'sharing' thing. Just go with it." Obby said with mock aggravation.

"Fine. Let's do this." Shawn said firmly, as though they were embarking on a high security operation.

In exemplary shadow fashion, Obby exactly mirrored Shawn's actions as he took his first bite of the dessert.

After a moment for the taste to register, Shawn fought to say around his mouthful, "You can taste the freshness."

"Mmm. Good." Obby responded.

"It's a good thing that I can see through magical enchantments because otherwise I'd be convinced that this wasn't real. I'd think it was some kind of illusion to trap us." Shawn said with a slow smile of contentment.

"All I can say is the whole thing with fat people... I get it now." Obby said frankly before taking another bite.

"Yeah. Well, neither one of us can afford to let that happen. As much fun as desserts are, they're for 'special' occasions. I need to keep myself in fighting shape and I'm going to be counting on you to back me up." Shawn said seriously before taking another bite of his dessert.

"Yeah. About that, I've been thinking..." Obby trailed off as he took another bite.

Shawn looked at him inquisitively, prompting him to share his thoughts.

"I don't really know what a shadow can do, I mean, like in a fight." Obby fought to explain.

"I just thought you'd go solid and hit them." Shawn said frankly.

"Yeah. And I can do that. But I was just thinking that there might be something else that I can do. I mean, something that *only* a shadow could do." Obby said seriously.

"I was thinking about something like that, except what I was wondering was if we can work out a few 'combos' that we could choreograph that would take an adversary by surprise." Shawn said thoughtfully.

"Like what?" Obby asked with interest.

"I don't know. I was just thinking that maybe there might be a way that I could give you a signal to let you know which combo I was planning for us to do then, when I see an opening, I could throw you or swing you at our opponent so that you can suffocate him or throw him off balance or something like that." Shawn said seriously.

"Yeah. I could see that taking someone by surprise." Obby said frankly.

There was a long silent moment between them before Shawn started to silently chuckle.

When Obby noticed, he smiled as he admitted, "I can see it too."

Shawn let loose an audible laugh, then said, "I'm just picturing a 'what the hell just happened' look on some perp's face."

"Can you imagine if he tried to tell someone about how he was apprehended?" Obby asked between his own chuckles.

"Your Honor, I swear to God, he hit me with his shadow." Shawn fought to say before breaking down into full laughter.

In a false high voice, with a pitiful southern accent, Obby dramatically said, "Counsellor, I suggest you instruct your client to enter a plea of 'not guilty by reason of insanity'. It would be a dern shame to let testimony such as this, go to waste."

That was the final straw that caused Shawn to start laughing so hard that he nearly fell out of his chair.