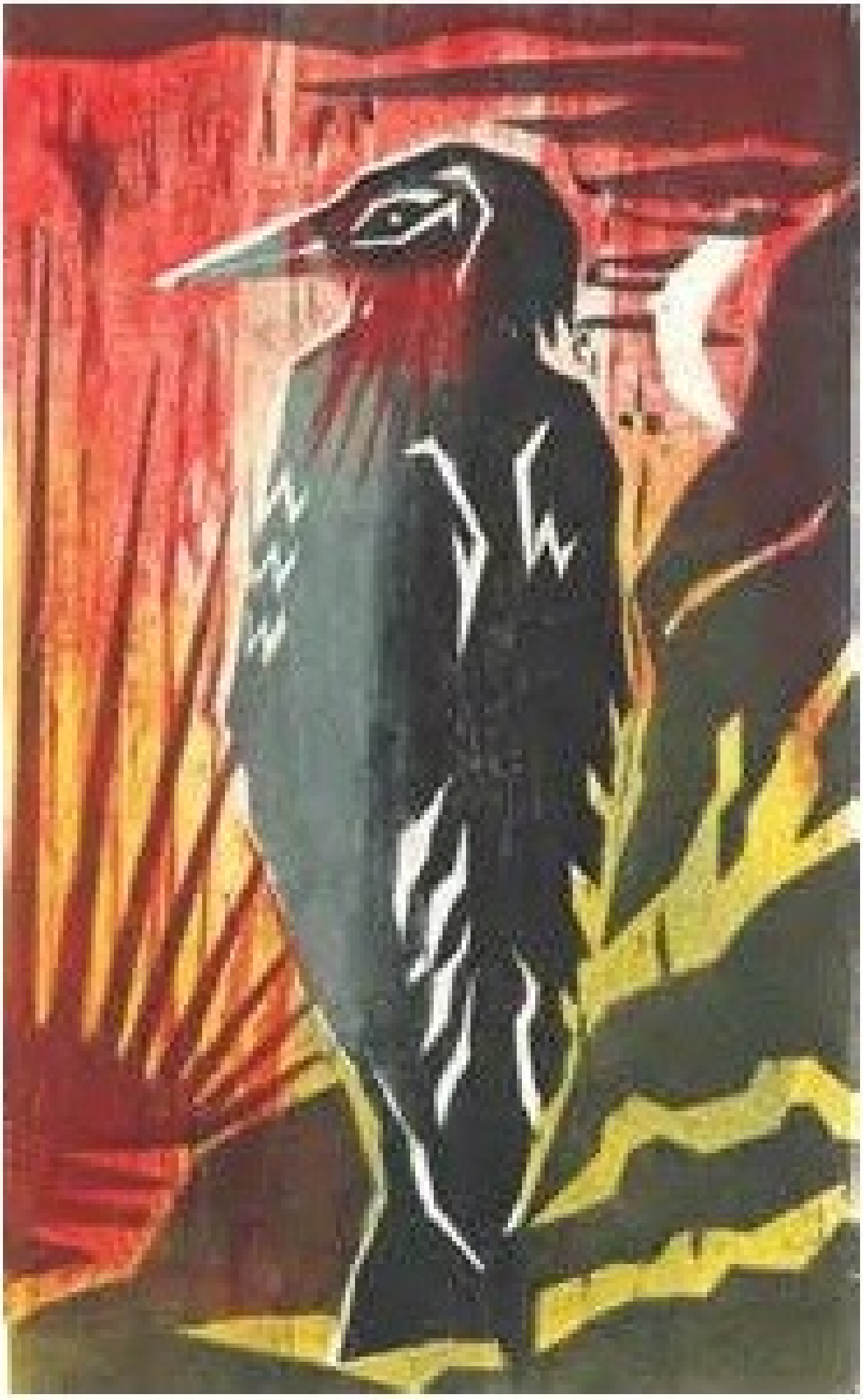

Raven

Parvenu

© 2015-2020 by MultiMapper
All Rights Reserved

'*What a bunch of CRAP!*' He thought to himself as he walked.

How was he expected to do a science project being teamed up with the ditziest bottle-blonde cheerleader AND the dumbest mouth-breathing knuckle-dragging jock in the school?!

To top it off, both of them had 'extracurricular' commitments that made it impossible for them to meet, speak, or in any way coordinate their efforts. He knew, without a doubt, that he'd end up doing the entire project himself and that his two vapid, freakishly attractive, classmates would end up getting passing grades solely due to his efforts. Worse, he suspected that that was the teacher's plan, all along.

As he rounded the corner to his apartment, a chill ran up his spine.

His mom's car was in the driveway and the back hatch was popped open.

'*Oh, no. Not again.*' He thought to himself as he slowly approached.

He cautiously entered the building, and as he was walking up the stairs he spotted his mother rushing out of their apartment with a box in her arms.

"Pack up your room. We've only got until the end of the night." She said as she hurried toward him.

'*Fuck!*' He thought to himself.

Then the more optimistic part of him interjected, '*At least I won't have to do that science project, now.*'

* * * * *

Unfortunately, this wasn't unusual.

It had happened so many times before that he had lost count.

Every so often, things would go badly and they'd be forced to move, basically skipping out on their back rent, and finding a new place to live.

However, he usually had some indication that it was coming.

His mom would let it be known that she was having trouble meeting the bills that month or that they didn't have enough money to have both electricity AND food.

But this time there had been no warning.

Truth be told, recently he and his mother had been less and less communicative. And as he was growing older, he was becoming more independent. Although they lived together, they had been leading increasingly separate lives. They had reached a point where they could go for a week or more without speaking to each other.

After filling a box, more or less out of habit, he left his room to find his mother frantically throwing kitchen items into a cardboard box, going from cupboard to cupboard taking everything out and either packing it, or throwing it in the trash.

He knew better than to question her at this stage of their packing. He had made that mistake before. Nothing good would come of it.

Mostly on autopilot, he walked down the stairs and deposited his box in the back of the car, then walked back into the apartment building to fill another.

As the shock wore off, numbness took it's place.

His life was a series of frantic moves, made out of necessity.

There was no action, only reaction.

'*Do what needs to be done, because there's no other choice.*'

The few possessions that he owned fitted easily into the boxes that he kept flattened under his bed... the bed that they would most likely be leaving behind. He had worked this puzzle so many times that he knew where each thing belonged, and in which box. He sometimes wondered why he even bothered unpacking them.

As he set another box aside, he walked to the closet and began to take down his hanging clothes. That took all of a minute. He didn't have much clothing, and what he *did* have was worn and outdated when they had bought them from whatever charity warehouse store they happened to be visiting that day.

Fortunately for him, distressed out-of-date fashion was all the rage, these days. So he didn't have the stigma of being out of place amongst his classmates. In fact, he dressed better than some of them, with their fashionably faded and strategically ripped clothing.

"Are you about finished?"

A sudden surge of emotions threatened to overwhelm him at the innocuous question. He wanted to burst into tears... or rage. However, he didn't have the luxury of being able to do either. He simply tamped down his emotions and called in return, "Yeah. Just about."

* * * * *

He had never had a father.

'*No big deal.*'

But looking at the desperate way that they lived, he couldn't help but wonder how his life might have been different if his parents had decided to get married and live together.

It was a moot point.

He didn't even know his biological father's name. When, in his younger and more naive years, he had asked, his mother had either skillfully evaded his questions or, when pressed, would adamantly refuse to divulge any information at all.

It didn't matter.

Such idle speculation served no purpose.

'*It is what it is. Deal with what's in front of you.*' He thought to himself.

As the car drove down the city streets, it occurred to him that he didn't know where they were going. Or if, in fact, they had any destination in mind. Would they be spending the night in some truck stop or roadside rest area? It wouldn't be the first time.

Despair welled up within him, threatening to overwhelm him, as he considered the absolute hopelessness of his life. He had no home, no foundation, no friends, no life to speak of, and no possibility of a future.

Just... reaction.

Like an animal in the wild, there was no thought for the future and no certainty of where his next meal would be coming from.

Only reaction.

Survival instinct.

While he was looking out the car window as the dusk gave way to the night, the thought came unbidden, '*Am I even human at all?*'

* * * * *

"Paul, there have been some things going on that I haven't told you about." His mother said, breaking the long, contemplative silence between them.

'*Since you haven't told me ANYTHING, I suppose that's true.*' Paul thought bitterly.

"I guess there's no easy way to say this..." She trailed off anxiously.

'*Talk about an ominous lead in! Let me guess. You don't know where we're going? We don't even have enough money for dinner? Maybe you're taking me to sell me for medical experiments!*'

'*Please, let it be the medical experiments! At least they'll probably feed me!*'

"I'm getting married."

'*Wait.*'

'*What?*'

"I didn't want to tell you anything about it before now because it was... well, to be honest, it was just too good to be true. I didn't want to jinx it."

'*Huh?*'

'*Hold on.*'

'*Back up.*'

'*What?*'

"I really meant to sit you down and have a long talk with you about this, but things ended up not working out that way."

'*...no easy way to say this...*'

'*...getting married...*'

'*Then what? Did I miss something?*'

"I mean, it's not like we '*have to*' get married, not this day and age."

'*Whoah.*'

'*I'm pretty sure I missed something.*'

'*Stop. Rewind. Play. Thank you for your patience...*'

"But when he found out, he asked and, I don't know... it just seemed right!"

'*WARNING! - Vaguery reaching critical levels!*'

'*Assumption overload imminent!*'

'*Substantive input required! Substantive input required!*'

"Found out what?" Paul was finally able to choke out.

Even as he said the words, they didn't seem to have any meaning.

'*Is there someone else in here with me, speaking for me?*' Paul thought to himself.

'*Because, if there is, I'd appreciate it if you would tell me what the hell is going on!*'

"In about six months, you're going to have a little brother or sister."

'...'

'*???*'

'*What?*'

"Well, to be honest, you're going to be getting a brother a little bit before that."

'*Hold on.*'

'*What was that thing after getting married?*'

'*I'm sure I missed something important, there.*'

"I mean, I'm not going to push you to accept him or treat him like your family, but I hope that you two will get along."

'*...getting married...*'

'*...little brother or sister...*'

'*...then, what was that next bit?*'

"Like I said, I hadn't planned on things going like this, but the new property management company at the apartment complex isn't willing to work with me and I was kind of backed into a corner."

'*Um, yeah. I know how that feels.*'

'*Now try it blindfolded... underwater.*'

'*Then you'll be close to what I'm feeling, right now.*'

"Where are we going?" Paul asked in a voice that trembled a little more than he would have liked.

'*Okay, that made sense.*'

'*The words seemed to have come out in the right order and everything.*'

'*I might actually get results with that one.*'

"I was wanting to move more slowly, but when all this happened, it just made sense for us to move in together."

'*Whoah! Hold it, there. You're losing me again.*'

'*Did I miss it when you said **where**?*'

'*Or, for that matter, **who**?*'

"I mean, we had sort of talked about it, but decided to wait until after you'd had time to adjust to the idea."

'*Me?*'

'*What idea?*'

'*Hey! Don't hang this on me!*'

"Everything's going to be fine. Everything's alright."

'*Um...*'

'*...yeah...*'

'*...sure it is.*'

* * * * *

As they passed through the huge wrought iron gates, Paul immediately thought of a cemetery. Not that there were any grave stones or anything. It was just a big open, immaculately kept, grassy field with a paved road meandering, somewhat pointlessly up and over a rise. But, to Paul, it seemed that that was how they designed the driveways in graveyards. Well, in the movies, anyway.

As they crested the rise, Paul spotted the large grey edifice as it stood all alone, jutting up in the midst of a perfectly kept lawn... or football field... possibly a golf course? There were no other houses in view as far as the eye could see.

'*Hey!*'

'*Wait!*'

'*Isn't this what insane asylums look like?*'

'*They put them out in the middle of nowhere so the crazies don't disturb anyone else!*'

'*So far out...*'

'*So remote...*'

'*That no one can hear you scream...*'

"He said that he'd leave the door open. Come inside. We'll come back out for our things, later." His mom said as she got out of the car.

Paul wasn't sure if he were really seeing what he was seeing.

'*Are we going to live in a museum?*' He thought as they approached the building that seemed to get even larger and more foreboding, the closer they got to it.

'*People can't really live here, can they?*'

'*I can't breathe.*'

The biggest doors EVER!

'*Mansion?*'

'*Movie set?*'

'*Dream?*'

'*Nightmare?*'

'*e. All of the above...*'

As his mom pushed one of the massive doors open, there wasn't any low, ominous creaking sound to foreshadow the atrocities to come.

'*They'll probably edit that in during post production.*'

'*It's essential.*'

"They're probably in the parlor. I think it's down here." Paul's mom said as she set off down one of the dimly lit grey corridors in the enormous granite monstrosity.

'*If we're going to live here, I'm going to need a map.*'

'*Or GPS.*'

'*...and maybe a scooter.*'

As his mom led the way into one of the rooms, she quietly asked, "Is your dad around?"

Paul walked in behind his mother and looked around to see who she was talking to. After a moment, he spotted a dark haired boy, about his same age, sitting on a couch.

"He asked me to wait in here for you, until you got here. He had a business call or something. He's in the study. He said that he'd be back in a minute." The boy responded casually.

"Paul, this is G. He's going to be your new brother." Paul's mom said, a little more cheerfully than seemed appropriate, under the circumstances.

The surprise on G's face was the first thing to reassure Paul all day.

At least there was someone who found the whole situation as ludicrous as he did.

'*I wonder if they told him ANYTHING about what's going on?*' Paul asked himself.

G got up off the couch and walked toward Paul with an easygoing, friendly expression. His entire posture was casual and unassuming.

"You need any help carrying stuff in?" G asked in a voice that wasn't just friendly, but even seemed to be a little bit hopeful.

'*I don't know where I am.*' Paul reminded himself.

'*I don't know what we're doing.*'

'*I don't know who these people are.*'

'*However, over the years I have learned some important life lessons. One of them being, when someone asks you that question, you ALWAYS answer...*'

"Yes. Thank you."

* * * * *

G and Paul walked down the dimly lit, intimidatingly huge, grey featureless hallway and out through the massive doors.

Paul opened the hatchback of their car and fished out a box, then turned to find G, standing with his hands out, waiting to accept it.

Paul handed it to him, then took out another of his boxes before starting back toward the enormous doors.

"It'll be easier if we go this way." G said as he started off in another direction, toward the side of the house.

'*Since I don't have a map, I'll take your word for it.*' Paul thought to himself as he followed.

"Is the rest of your stuff coming? Or are you going to have to go get another load?" G asked casually, as they walked.

"No. This is it." Paul answered timidly.

"Cool." G said simply, easily accepting his answer.

'*No.*'

'*Not cool.*'

'*Pathetic.*' Paul thought with an ache in his heart, as he continued to follow.

"If you don't like it here, I can show you the guest rooms, but they're kind of... sterile." G said with a bit of distaste evident in his tone, then continued, "Check out my room, first, and see if you want to stay out here with me."

As he was saying that, Paul could see where G was leading him. Around the side of the house, there seemed to be another, smaller house, connected by a little... what do you call those things that connect a spaceship to the space station? Never mind. It was a little glassed in hallway that connected it to the main house.

G opened some white painted double doors (of normal size) with glass panes throughout. Unaccountably, they served to put Paul at ease. Seemingly, it was the contrast between them and the enormous doors on the 'museum' that did that.

However, when they stepped through the doors, any illusion of a quaint little country farmhouse was suddenly shocked away.

The room was RED. (Redrum! Redrum!)

Actually, it looked like red velvet was used throughout the room to give it an almost movie theater or carnival feel. There were brass accent pieces and gold fringe in places that served to break up the intimidating color.

The next things to draw Paul's attention were the old carnival posters, seemingly hung haphazardly around the room, but it only took Paul a moment to realize that they were strategically placed, made to look as though their placement was random and slightly askew.

The posters were of faded, evil looking, demented clowns and advertisements for various 'freak show' attractions.

After seeing the sterile, grey 'museumy' main house, the contrast was a bit overwhelming.

As the details of the room finally seemed to settle into his consciousness, Paul came to the sudden realization that G's room was AWESOME!

* * * * *

The area they first walked into seemed to be a living room or a lounge. It was filled with beanbag chairs, pillows, big puffy blankets and a variety of sofas. It looked as though a dozen people could easily settle into the space and chat comfortably.

"I didn't really think this through. I guess we can make it up as we go along. Just put your stuff anywhere and we'll work it out when we've got everything in." G said frankly.

Paul found an open spot behind one of the couches and put down his box.

G set his box beside Paul's, then led the way back to the deceptively innocent looking white double doors.

* * * * *

"Dad says that he pulled a few strings and that you'll be starting school with me tomorrow. So we won't be able to stay up too late." G said as they walked back toward the car.

'*What?*'

'*School?*'

'*Seriously?*'

'*My whole life gets turned upside down and inside out in one day and I don't even get a day off to adjust to it?*'

* * * * *

Once all of Paul's things were brought inside, Paul looked around uncertainly.

"I've only got the one bed in here, but I hardly ever sleep in it. You can use it, if you want." G said frankly.

"Where do you sleep?" Paul asked curiously.

"Wherever I happen to be when I get sleepy. Usually on a couch or a beanbag, in front of the TV. Sometimes I crash on the couch in the living room, back in the house." G said casually.

"Where should I put my stuff?" Paul asked cautiously, feeling that he was intruding on G's personal space.

"There's a monster closet in the bedroom. You can put stuff in there if you want. I don't use even half of it." G said, then got up off the couch and led the way into the bedroom.

* * * * *

Done in much the same color scheme as the living room, the bedroom was it's own special variety of 'Dark Carnival'.

The twisted gold posts on the enormous four poster bed might be seen as gaudy in other circumstances, but they blended in perfectly with the red velvet and gold fringed tapestries and cords.

"It's over here." G said, drawing Paul's miniscule thread of attention.

When Paul looked into the closet, he was astounded by the fact that it was bigger than his bedroom had been at the apartment.

As G had said, the closet wasn't even close to half full. Paul not only had room for all his clothes in there, he could easily put all his worldly possessions in there... twice, without encroaching on G's space.

"I just thought of something. You seem pretty uptight. I'm not. If you can't handle being around me, just let me know and I'll help you move into a guest room in the house." G said seriously.

Paul looked at him with surprise at the statement, but appreciated G's honesty.

"I'm okay." Paul said sincerely.

G smiled at the reaction then, with a tilt of his head, indicated for Paul to follow him back into the living room.

* * * * *

Paul followed G's lead and ended up taking a seat on one of the couches.

"I've never been around someone as quiet as you before. It's actually kinda cool." G said with a smile.

Paul looked at him with a wide-eyed, inquisitive expression.

"I've never been the 'Alpha' before. So you're gonna have'ta be patient with me. I don't want to screw this up." G said honestly.

'*Alpha?*'

'*Ooookay.*'

"Anyway, this is my house. No one comes in here unless I invite them. So I can walk around naked or just in my underwear, if I want. Is that going to freak you out or anything?" G asked seriously.

'*Okay. That kinda came outta left field.*'

'*But, I guess that I've been around naked guys in the locker room in gym class and it never bothered me...*'

'*Who am I kidding? I've nearly jerked my dick off thinking about the guys in the locker room!*'

'*I probably shouldn't share that fact with G, or I might have to sleep in a guest room in the museum.*'

"No. That's no problem." Paul said, and was proud of the fact that his voice didn't crack or sound too high or anything like that.

"Good." G said with a smile.

'*What the **hell** was that?*'

'*He smiles at me and I start feeling all gooey inside?!*'

'*Oh, shit! I hope that doesn't mean what I think it means!*'

'*...*'

'*I want it to happen again.*'

'...'

'*I am **so** screwed.*'

"I guess I should also tell you that I was in kind of a relationship for a while. It's over now, but it just broke up, so someone might still say something about it and it could get weird and uncomfortable. I'll just say sorry in advance, in case that happens." G said regretfully.

'*I've never been dumped. So I don't know what that feels like.*'

'*Of course, I've never been loved, either.*'

'...'

'*I just want to see him smile again.*'

"Are you okay?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Mostly, yeah. When they decided that they wanted to be a couple without me... I understood. I mean, it's not like I didn't see it coming. But it still hurt." G said honestly.

"They?" Paul asked hesitantly, wanting to confirm what he'd just heard.

"Yeah. A guy and a girl. We were a threesome for a while... for a few months, actually." G said, somewhat distantly.

"Are you gay?" Paul asked before he could catch himself. He knew that that was something that you *never* asked someone. He immediately regretted asking and wished that he could take it back.

"I guess that's up to you to decide." G answered him, and didn't seem to be the least bit rattled or offended by Paul asking the question.

Paul puzzled over G's response for a moment before he cautiously asked, "What?"

"It's your label and only you know what it means to you. I don't think of myself as gay. When I like someone and they like me back, we might decide to do stuff together, and some of that might end up being sex. It doesn't matter to me if it's guys or girls. Everyone just does what they enjoy and if things go right, we find things that we enjoy doing together."

'*Overload... Overload... Overload.*'

'*An error has occurred. To continue: Press CTRL+ALT+DEL to restart.*'

'*If you do this, you will lose any unsaved information in all open applications.*'

'*Press any key to continue...*'

"I've never had a girlfriend... or a boyfriend." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"Yeah. Well, I got an early start. I think most people our age haven't ever had the balls to try anything yet... at least, with someone else." G said simply.

Paul absently nodded.

"Have I freaked you out too much? Or do you still want to stay here?" G asked cautiously.

"I'll stay." Paul said absently. He didn't have to think about it. The decision had already been made.

"Good. I just got this really great classic anime that I've been wanting to check out. You wanna watch it with me until dinner's ready?" G asked hopefully.

"I should probably be unpacking." Paul said reluctantly.

"If we start unpacking now, we'll have to stop in the middle of it when dinner's ready. Besides, you look like you could use a break." G said honestly.

'*A break?*'

'*Yeah.*'

'*At least.*'

"Yeah. Okay." Paul said, then forced a smile at G to show his gratitude for the suggestion.

* * * * *

'*First, there was some gruesome bloody violence, for no particular reason.*'

'*Next, this thing with tentacles was doing horrible, unspeakable things, again, for no reason that I could discern.*'

'*Then, **after** the opening credits, we got to the freakishly big boobed schoolgirls piloting giant robots.*'

'*That part actually seemed to make some kind of sense.*'

'*Of course, I could be wrong about that.*'

'*The way that the enormous cartoon boobs bounced and jiggled was strangely hypnotizing.*'

"***Boys, it's time for dinner.***" Paul's mom's voice called from the intercom.

"Good! I'm starving!" G said as he paused the video.

"Me, too." Paul said as he stood.

"Are you better?" G asked as he also stood and looked at Paul with concern.

"Yeah." Paul said with a smile, then continued, "It's funny, I already feel like I know you and I don't even know your real name."

"What makes you think my real name isn't G?"

"Is it?"

"No. My real name is Gwayne. The G was the only part of it worth saving." G finished with a grin.

"Good choice." Paul said, feeling unaccountably happy.

"C'mon. Food." G said as he led the way.

* * * * *

"Come on in, boys. It's on the table." Paul's mom said as she met them at the dining room door.

The amount of food on the table looked to be for more than four people, but Paul wasn't about to complain. And, from the look of it, neither was G. The layout seemed to be of restaurant quality and fit for any visiting dignitary. Everything looked absolutely *perfect*.

As Paul walked to the table and took a seat at one of the place settings, he looked around curiously.

There were no windows in the room, not that it would have mattered so late in the day at this time of year. But the lighting was such that it was focused entirely on the massive dining room table.

The rest of the room, with it's grey stone walls and colorless adornments, seemed to fade into the darkness, as though it didn't exist. It was almost like they were sitting there, suspended in a void, separated from space and time.

"Are we waiting for Dad?" G asked cautiously.

"He said he'd just be a minute." Paul's mom said as she also took her seat.

"Famous last words." G said with a roll of his eyes, but made no move to serve himself.

"Sorry. But with the wedding coming so soon, there are certain things that have to be done immediately." A man said as he walked briskly into the room. The man looked fairly average, with dark hair and dark eyes. He was kind of handsome, and there was no doubt that he was G's father. But the thing that caught Paul off guard was the deep rich tone of the man's voice. It seemed to be far lower than one would expect of someone of his modest size. The sound sent a chill right up Paul's spine.

"D, this is my son, Paul." Paul's mom said proudly.

Before either could respond, she continued, "Paul, this is my fiancee, D."

'*D?*'

'*Seriously?*'

'*G's father is named D?*'

"It's nice to meet you, Paul. I'm sorry we couldn't do this in a more relaxed manner, but circumstances conspired against us." D said frankly.

The deep rich tone of his voice caused another chill to run up Paul's spine, but he was finally able to say, "Yeah. They'll do that."

When D laughed, the sound left Paul feeling stunned. The laugh was rich and deep and unaccountably sent a tingle of something like fear coursing through Paul's body.

"Yes. They will." D finally said warmly.

"So, Dad, what's the big rush on the wedding, anyway?" G asked curiously.

Paul was glad that he did, because he wanted to know, as well, but felt intimidated and weak in D's commanding presence.

"Go ahead and eat." D said casually, then continued, "We've decided that the best way to do this is to have the wedding on Halloween. Since the family will be meeting anyway, it seems like the perfect time."

As Paul reached to serve himself, he noticed that his hand was slightly trembling.

He couldn't determine if it had anything to do with fear, hunger, or perhaps other influences of which he was not aware.

"So you're going to have the wedding 'there'?" G asked to be sure.

D nodded his confirmation, then said, "But that doesn't relieve us of the burden of composing a guest list."

"Yeah. Good luck with that." G said with a grin.

"No doubt, someone will be overlooked and feel slighted. But we can only do our best." D said in resignation.

"Is there anything you need for us to do?" G asked curiously.

"Actually, yes. The two of you are going to be taken out of school a few days in advance of the wedding to allow for travel time and for finalizing arrangements when we arrive. Taking that into account, you'll both need to be fitted for suits for the practice dinners and receptions and such, five, I should think. So you'll need to see to that early to give the tailor time to get the adjustments made." D said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "Of course, all plans and dates are still subject to change at this early stage of planning."

"Can't I just wear the suit I already have?" G asked hopefully.

"You'll need more than one suit. Besides, I doubt that you would be able to put yours on, much less look anywhere near presentable in it. Please, Son, humor me." D said with a hopeful look at G.

"Okay, but you have to remember this when I get married. No whining. Just do it." G warned his father.

"Yes. That sounds fair." D said with a smile that revealed his delight at the thought.

"Is there any way that we can invite Nazzy and Vinda to the wedding?" G asked hopefully.

"Isn't that going to be awkward?" D asked cautiously.

"Maybe, for a little bit, but they did what they felt like they had to do. Just because I was hurt by it doesn't mean that I don't understand. Besides, I'm really alright now, and I'd like to share something like this with them. Plus, they both like you, even if I weren't in the picture, they'd want to be there for you." G said honestly.

"I'll see to it that they're invited and, if they accept, I'll make arrangements for their airfare." D said with a smile of pride at his son.

'*Ex Boyfriend and ex girlfriend...*'

'*...being invited to his father's wedding...*'

'*...Airfare?*'

"Airfare?" Paul asked cautiously.

"The wedding's going to be on our family estate in Scotland, near Altnaharra." D said frankly.

Paul didn't know how to respond to that and felt that he was on the verge of overloading again.

'*Mom's getting married...*'

'*..to the deep voiced guy...*'

'...*who, to be fair, seems really nice...*'

'*...in Scotland?!*'

"How much have you told Paul about the family?" D asked his son curiously.

"Nothing." G answered honestly.

"After dinner, would you mind?" D asked in a leading tone.

"Me? You're sure that you want *me* to do it?" G asked to confirm.

"I have faith in you." D said with a slightly menacing grin.

"Great! No pressure." G said with a roll of his eyes.

'***That*** *can't be good.*'

* * * * *

Following the dinner, Paul followed G back to his 'room', on the other side of the little glass hallway.

For some reason, that delighted Paul to no end.

'*Houston, we're leaving the mothership...*'

"So, what's the big secret?" Paul asked when they were back in G's living room, sitting on one of the couches.

G looked uncomfortable and quietly said, "We're not like other people."

'*Wow! It's like I suddenly had a flashback of every sci-fi movie I've ever seen, like, all at once!*'

Paul was surprised by the statement and cautiously asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

G let out a long sigh, then said, "It's complicated. Let's just say that my family... *our* family, is *interesting*."

"Interesting, like being good storytellers? Or interesting, like gathering on the full moon to drink the blood of virgins at midnight?" Paul asked cautiously, hoping that it would be taken as a joke... and that he hadn't inadvertently guessed right.

"Somewhere in between." G said gravely.

'*I'd be really pissed off at him right now if he weren't in so much turmoil about telling me.*'

'...'

'*and so cute.*'

'*Wait, where did that come from?*'

'*Bad inner voice! Bad!*'

"So, what? How is your family different?" Paul asked seriously, hoping that it would help G say what he needed to say.

"You know how every family has one person who's really freaky or eccentric?" G asked cautiously.

"Yeah. And if you don't know who it is in your family, then it's probably you." Paul said honestly.

'*He goes in with the joke!*'

'*He shoots from center court!*'

'*It looks good...*'

'*It looks good...*'

'*And...*'

'...*Denied!*'

"Yeah, well... every person in *our* family is like that." G continued, as though he hadn't heard.

"Like how?" Paul asked cautiously. He could tell how this admission of... whatever it was, bothered G.

'*Oh, screw it! He **is** cute!*'

'*He's freakin adorable!*'

'*Sorry Inner Voice, you were right.*'

"For example, Aunt Zennie is obsessed with ladybugs. Grandma Gruit believes that she's a witch, not like Wicca, but more Disneyish, like in Sleeping Beauty or Snow White." G said anxiously.

'*Wait.*'

'*What?*'

"Okay." Paul said hesitantly.

"Some of them don't seem to realize it, and the rest just accept it or even embrace it as part of who they are." G said urgently, as if willing Paul to understand.

'*Okay, freaky people. Weird family. I guess it happens.*'

"What about you, G? What kind of weird thing do you have going on?" Paul asked curiously.

"Telling you's no fun. You have to figure *that* out for yourself." G said as his anxiety finally gave way and he broke into a smile.

'*Whoah! Was that a flirt?*'

"Well, if I had to guess right now... Does it have anything to do with sex?" Paul asked speculatively.

'*The ball's in your court.*'

"Which answer would make you feel better?" G asked, not betraying anything in his expression.

'*Nice return.*'

"I'm not sure." Paul said honestly.

"Then don't worry about it." G said with a grin.

'*The point goes to G!*'

'*I'm going to need to work on my game!*'

'*He's good!*'

"Why did your dad want you to tell me about this?" Paul asked cautiously, he still didn't understand what was so bad.

"I guess to give you some time to prepare. The whole family gets together on Halloween, so that's why they're rushing to have the wedding then. One at a time, the family's not *too* bad, but all at once... you might need to brace yourself."

'*The whole family gathers for Halloween...*'

'*Yeah, nothing weird about that.*'

"Is it really bad?" Paul asked carefully.

"Sometimes. I grew up with it and I know what to expect. But sometimes it's a little much, even for me." G said honestly.

"Well, all my life it's just been me and my mom. Even if your family's a bunch of eccentrics, I think it'll be nice to know what it's like to be part of a family, even for a little bit." Paul said sincerely and felt a little spark of fear at revealing so much to someone who was essentially a stranger.

'*Not cool.*'

'*Some things shouldn't be said.*'

'*Now G's going to think I'm just a needy little pathetic worm.*'

'*...*'

'*I'm not. Am I?*'

"As long as you don't look down on them and treat them like freaks, I'm pretty sure they'll love you." G said warmly. Paul was glad that G didn't capitalize on his vulnerability.

"I don't think I've ever looked down on anyone before." Paul said honestly.

'*It's hard to look down on people when you're wearing someone else's castoffs and you don't know if you'll be able to eat dinner.*'

"I know you'll be great."

* * * * *

After their talk about the family had concluded, the two boys remained sitting on the couch, just thinking their own thoughts and content to be in good company.

"I need to unpack." Paul finally regretfully said.

"Why?" G asked as he turned his head slightly, to glance at Paul with one eye.

"So I can have my clothes for school tomorrow." Paul said unenthusiastically.

"We wear uniforms, you can wear one of mine. From the look of you, I think it'll fit." G said honestly.

"Uniforms?" Paul asked cautiously.

"It's not too bad. You get used to it."

"How old are you, anyway?" Paul asked curiously.

"Fifteen." G said simply.

"Me, too. Do you think we'll be in the same classes?" Paul asked as he turned in his seat, so he was facing G.

"Maybe. We have a lot of really small classes, so they'll probably put you in whichever one is smallest, each class period. Don't worry. It shouldn't be too bad." G said frankly.

"I've had to change schools a lot. So I'm not too worried. But is there anything I need to know about, you know, like bullies or gangs or... anything?" Paul asked with concern.

"It's a private school, so no gangs. As far as bullies... I've never really noticed a problem, but I've been going there forever. If anyone gives you any trouble, just let me know." G said as he turned to mirror Paul's position and look him in the eyes.

"I may be quiet, but I'm not helpless. I can fight my own battles." Paul assured him.

"I'm not planning to fight. But if you have a problem and you let me know, then maybe I can help. I know just about everyone and I can probably sort it out without *anyone* having to fight." G said honestly.

Paul thought that over for a moment, then smiled and said, "Yeah. Okay."

'*I don't know what to say, except... wow.*'

'*I've changed schools so many times that I've become numb to it.*'

'*But this... wow!*'

"Wanna help me finish watching the anime? There's still a few episodes left." G asked hopefully.

"Sounds good." Paul said with a smile, then turned himself so that he could watch the big screen TV.

Paul's eyes finally drifted shut despite the barrage of bouncing, jiggling enormous boobs, giant robots fighting hand to hand, and the occasional panty shot.

* * * * *

Paul woke to the most glorious sensation.

He was surrounded in warmth and security. He was being tenderly held and he had the sensation of being cherished.

Then, another curious sensation jolted him fully awake. There were lips gently kissing his neck.

Equal parts arousal and fear caused him to flinch.

"Sorry." G whispered as he pulled away slightly.

Although Paul's mind was still more there than here, he was 'with it' enough to realize what was going on, his reaction, right at that moment, could set the course of their relationship forever after.

What he did in the next few seconds would determine whether they were friends, brothers or... something more.

'*Do the **guy** thing and act revolted.*'

'*Do the **friend** thing and brush it off as nothing.*'

'*Do the **brother** thing and make a joke about it.*'

"That was a nice way to wake up." Paul said in a raspy, low voice.

G pulled back a little more to look Paul in the eyes, but said nothing. His only response was to smile timidly, then climb out of their warm little nest.

'*Right answer!*'

* * * * *

"Get dressed. We need to go to breakfast." G said when he returned from the bathroom.

"I need to take a shower, first." Paul said as he unwillingly extricated himself from the blankets.

"We'll shower when we get back." G said simply, then added, "Food."

Paul smiled, and was relieved to find that his morning erection wasn't pitching *too* big a tent as he made his way past G and into the bathroom.

* * * * *

When they walked into the dining room, Paul was surprised to find that his mother had made a full, old fashioned, breakfast for them.

His surprise was short lived when he looked at the food laid out before them.

Although his mother wasn't a 'bad' cook, she had never exhibited any type of culinary artistry when it came to the presentation of their food.

'*Cook it up, slap it on a plate.*'

Even though Paul couldn't remember his mother ever saying the words, her philosophy was clear enough to see in every meal that she served.

However, here, every little sausage link was placed on the serving platter with mathematical precision. The eggs were displayed with an artist's flare, and even had the tiniest dusting of paprika to add that hint of color that brought the entire plate to life, making it a feast for the eyes. Even the glass pitcher of orange juice, slightly fogged with the tiniest drops of condensation, was nothing short of *perfect*.

D walked into the room and directly to his place at the table.

"How are you boys doing this morning? Did you get enough sleep?" He asked as he unfolded his linen napkin and placed it on his lap.

"Yeah. We even woke up before the alarm." G said happily.

"You'll have a few extra minutes to get ready. I'll be driving you to school today." D said casually.

"What for?" G asked curiously.

"Well, I've already made all the arrangements for Paul to start school today, but I just thought I'd stop in to make sure that nothing was overlooked on his enrollment." D said frankly.

"Cool!" G said happily.

"Paul, I didn't think to ask earlier, do you have clothes for today?" D asked with concern.

"He can wear one of my uniforms. They should fit him." G answered for him.

"Remind me and we'll get him some of his own." D said seriously.

"I've got plenty. No rush." G said with a smile at his dad.

Although Paul was paying attention to what was being said, the majority of his attention was focused on the outrageously good food.

Suddenly, the thought came to him that what he was experiencing might not really be real.

The beautiful house, the loving family, the incredible food... they were all elements of the dreams that he had been having for longer than he could remember.

* * * * *

"I'll go first." G said as they exited the glass hallway and walked into G's 'room'.

'*How does one verify the existence of reality?*'

'*And if reality isn't real, what do you do about it?*'

'*And, come to think of it, what's so great about reality, anyway?*'

"What?" Paul asked as he broke out of his thoughts.

"I'll shower first, if that's okay." G said more slowly.

"Oh, um. Yeah." Paul said with distraction.

'*Reality sucks.*'

'*If life is but a dream, so what?*'

'*It beats worrying about where your next meal is coming from, or if it's coming at all.*'

"While I'm doing that, you can get your stuff together." G said as he led the way into the bedroom.

"Huh?" Paul asked in confusion.

'*I've got an adorable, cute, incredibly friendly guy here, who cares about me.*'

'*And he's talking about showering.*'

'*Screw reality! Dreams rule!*'

"Underwear, socks... I mean, you can share mine, if you want. But either way, you can be getting that stuff together while I'm showering. It'll just take me a few minutes." G said as he started to peel off the clothes he had been wearing the previous day.

"Yeah. Right." Paul said nervously, then turned and hurried into the closet, where his boxes were stored.

* * * * *

After gathering everything he might need for a shower, Paul walked into the bedroom in time to see G emerging from the bathroom, naked as the day he was born.

G's body was long and lean. Although he was obviously still a teenager, not having gained the muscle definition of an adult, his body was still nothing to be ashamed of.

As Paul's gaze drifted lower, he concluded that G had nothing to be ashamed of there, either. While he might not have the most enormous 'equipment', it was of a decent size and, quite frankly, an absolute beauty.

When Paul realized what he was doing, standing and staring at G's naked body, he quickly looked into G's eyes and received a warm smile in return.

"I'm just... gonna... go now." Paul stammered.

'*Busted!*'

"There's plenty of time." G assured him.

'*He used to have a boyfriend.*'

'*So he's not gonna freak.*'

'*And him knowing that I'm interested... not a bad thing.*'

Something about G's tone served to put Paul at ease. Feeling considerably less anxious, Paul walked to the bathroom and took his shower.

* * * * *

G's bathroom was nothing short of luxurious.

Paul was used to putting up with the lo-flo showerheads that barely farted out enough misty water to get him wet. The rainshower showerhead in G's bathroom made the experience of showering a joy.

As Paul was about to walk out into the bedroom, where he had left his clothes, he started to wrap the towel around his waist. But before he could cinch the towel, he thought better of it and hung it back on the towel rack.

'*Come and get it!*'

* * * * *

G looked up when Paul walked, naked, into the bedroom.

Paul was anxious about his probable reaction, but only slightly.

G broke into a grin, but said nothing. The look in his eyes was all that Paul needed. G obviously approved of what he was seeing. That was all that Paul needed to know.

'*Phase one: Complete.*'

'*We've checked each other out. Everything passes inspection.*'

'*Phase two: Begin.*'

* * * * *

The sensation of wearing the school uniform wasn't uncomfortable as much as it was unfamiliar.

Also, Paul couldn't seem to relax into the notion that he wasn't wearing 'his' clothes.

"Do you have to work today?" G asked his father as he drove.

"There may be one or two things that I have to deal with. But I'll mostly be focused on the plans for the wedding." D said frankly.

"I guess it's good that you don't have to go to the office and work from nine to five each day." G said with a smile.

"It's good to be the boss." D said with a self-satisfied grin.

Paul couldn't help but chuckle at the statement, having a Mel Brooks moment.

"Paul, I should have thought to ask earlier, have you noticed needing anything?" D asked carefully.

It wasn't the question, itself, that triggered the emotional reaction. And it wasn't the situation, of being driven to school, although that probably contributed. But something about D's expression of concern made Paul want to burst into tears.

'*All I've got is the crap in the cardboard boxes.*'

'*Still, right here, right now...*'

'*I've got everything I need.*'

'*More than I dreamed of, in fact.*'

"I can't think of anything." Paul was finally able to quietly say.

D glanced at him in the rearview mirror and the warmth in his eyes made Paul have to fight to contain his tears all over again.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, I need to get my son enrolled." D said as they walked into the school's office.

"I'll be with you in just a moment." The woman behind the desk said absently, without even looking up from her work.

'*Same old routine.*'

'*Sit.*'

'*Wait.*'

'*Eventually someone will get sick of looking at us and do the minimum required to pass us on to the next drone down the line.*'

D's eyes went wide in surprise, then he took a small... incredibly small, phone out of his pocket and quickly dialed.

Paul wasn't surprised when he heard the ringing, but was curious when the ringing sound was that of a cell phone and came from one of the offices.

"Marsha. It's D. I'm here to enroll my son. Do you think you could see to it personally?" D asked seriously.

'*My son?!*'

'*Not my step-son, not my girlfriend's son, not the creepy little guy who's perving on my son?*'

'*It must be a dream.*'

'*Please, don't ever let me wake up!*'

A woman came rushing out of one of the offices, looking around frantically. When she spotted D, she quickly composed herself and hurried to help him.

Before she could speak, D calmly said, "Paul needs to be enrolled. I have a number of things that I need to attend to so, if you wouldn't mind terribly, could I just sign what I need to sign and pay what I need to pay to make it happen?"

'*If I were going to dream up a dad, he'd be just as cool as D.*'

'*Truthfully, I couldn't have dreamed up someone as nice as him.*'

'*No. Not just nice...*'

'...*perfect.*'

The woman seemed to be flustered by the suggestion, but finally said, "I noticed his paperwork waiting this morning when we came in. But we're not in the habit of enrolling students mid-semester..."

"Do I look like I care?" D asked flatly.

'*Way to go D!*'

'*Do it again!*'

'*Do it again!*'

That seemed to knock the wind out of her sails.

The woman, Marsha, took a slow breath to compose herself, then calmly said, "Why don't I get Paul placed in his classes? Then I can sort through his paperwork and see that he has everything he needs."

"Yes. Why don't you?" D said without expression.

'*Zing!*'

'*Ouch!*'

'*That had to hurt!*'

Marsha was stunned by his words for a moment, then she hurried away, back into her office.

Paul looked up at his step-father-to-be with wonder and a small amount of fear.

D smiled warmly at him and said, "After a certain point, there's no need to put up with self-important little bureaucrats. Commit your concern to the things that deserve it."

Paul slowly nodded, as if he understood what D were telling him.

'*I don't think I've ever been **in awe**, before.*'

'*I didn't know it'd be this cool.*'

"Here we go. I have a class schedule for Paul. Janice can walk Paul to his first class, so he can get started right away." Marsha said as she rushed up to them with a freshly printed piece of paper.

'*How very fast and efficient of you, Marsha. It's a shame that you couldn't have done that without D having to roast your ass over the fire.*'

D glanced at the woman behind the desk, who was getting to her feet and absently said, "If she has the time."

'*Ow!*'

'*No mercy!*'

Marsha handed the sheet of paper to Janice, then looked at D to see if he needed anything further.

After a moment to look over the sheet of paper, Janice quietly said, "I'll take you to your first class."

'*Yeah. I can hardly wait.*'

Paul glanced back as he was leaving the office to find D watching him, with an expression of warmth.

'*I never, ever ever **ever** want to wake up!*'

* * * * *

The teacher in Paul's first period class obviously wasn't used to being interrupted, and certainly not by a new enrollment. But she seemed to take it in stride and indicated for Paul to take one of the unoccupied seats in the classroom.

As he listened to the lecture and tried to follow along with the examples on the whiteboard, Paul had no clue, whatsoever, what the woman was talking about.

He could tell that it was something vaguely resembling math or algebra, but it was so far beyond his understanding that he didn't even have a name for what it was.

* * * * *

The layout of the school was actually easy to follow and the numbering of the classrooms made logical sense, so Paul was able to follow his little class schedule without incident.

Unfortunately, that was the only thing that seemed to go his way.

As Paul moved from one class to another, he felt that he would need to understand a lot more about what they were talking about to even reach the level where he considered himself to be ignorant... at this point he was just plain stupid.

He didn't know the answers.

He didn't understand the questions.

The teachers could be up there speaking Kiswahili and he couldn't possibly have understood less of what they were talking about.

* * * * *

When it came time for lunch, Paul just followed the tide of students who all seemed to be headed in the same general direction. As he walked with his eyes cast down, he was feeling pretty disheartened.

"Paul! How's it going?" G asked happily as he approached.

"Not awesome." Paul said despairingly.

"What's wrong?" G asked with immediate concern.

"It's like being in kindergarten and trying to take college classes. That's how I felt today. I didn't understand anything." Paul said and was embarrassed to feel tears starting to well in his eyes.

Without hesitation, G pulled him into a hug and quietly said, "It's not that big of a deal. We'll get you a tutor to help you get caught up, then you'll be fine."

'*Mmmm. That's nice.*'

"But what if I'm not smart enough to learn all this high level stuff?" Paul asked in a whisper.

'*Just keep holding me like this and I'll find a way to deal.*'

"Don't even worry about that. Once you get all tooted, you'll be fine." G said with a grin.

"Tooted?" Paul asked as he fought to keep from smiling.

"Yeah, that's what a tutor does, he toots you. Once you're all tooted, you won't have any problems." G said confidently.

Paul couldn't help but laugh at the absurd reasoning and returned G's hug gratefully.

'*Sweet, warm, cute and funny!*'

"Hey, guys!" G said happily.

Paul turned to see a boy and a girl, their same age, looking at them with surprise.

It was at that moment that Paul realized that he and G had been hugging, in the hallway, in front of everyone.

"Nazzy and Vinda, this is Paul." G said casually, as he turned to face them. Paul noticed that G kept one arm around him in a casual hug.

"Hi." Paul said cautiously.

"Remember? I told you about them." G said to Paul, seriously.

"Oh, yeah." Paul responded as he realized that they were G's former boy and girlfriend.

'*Hate them.*'

'*They hurt G. They must be destroyed.*'

'*But G doesn't seem to be angry with them, and they seem kinda nice.*'

'*Okay. I'll let them live... for now.*'

"Guys. This is Paul, his mom's going to marry my dad." G said frankly.

"Beth's his mom?" Nazzy asked with surprise.

Paul was shocked by the question and asked, "You know my mom?"

"Yeah. She's been dating D for a couple months, now. I was hoping that they'd end up together. D needs someone." Nazzy said frankly.

'*A couple months?! Where was I during all of this?*'

'*Oh, yeah. Living my crap life and trying to get along at Ghetto High.*'

'*I wonder what else Mom's been up to while I haven't been paying attention.*'

"How are you doing, G?" Vinda asked into the silence that followed.

"I'm okay." G said honestly, then casually added, "By the way, I asked dad if he'd invite you to the wedding. He already said that he would and that he'd pay for your airfare if you say that you want to go."

"Is that going to be alright with you?" Vinda asked cautiously.

'*Thank you for asking.*'

'*You may live.*'

G smiled at the question, then said, "Well, it's not about me. I know you both really like my dad, so whether I'm okay with it or not, you should be there to celebrate this with him. But honestly, I had a nice little brooding fit for a few days, and now I'm fine."

'*G is so cool and so awesome!*'

'*I don't think I've ever met **anyone** who was so incredibly cool about things.*'

"Good." Nazzy said with a smile, then added, "Let's go ahead and eat."

"Right." G said with a grin, then urged Paul to walk with him, maintaining an arm around him, much like Nazzy and Vinda, who were walking in front of them.

'*So, this, whatever G and I have, it's not just going to be behind closed doors, where no one else can see it?*'

'*Scary...*'

'*...but good.*'

* * * * *

Paul wasn't sure if it were something that Nazzy and Vinda had done, or if it were the fact that he had been seen with G, but for whatever reason, when Paul went to his first class after lunch, the difference was like day and night.

The classes weren't any easier for him to understand, but whereas before he had felt like an outsider trying to infiltrate a culture of which he had no knowledge, now he felt like he was a long lost relation being welcomed back into the fold.

No one had spoken one word to him all morning, but for the entire afternoon, people were walking up to him, introducing themselves, and offering him their help, should he have need of it.

The contrast was stark. The attention was a bit overwhelming... and somewhat intoxicating.

Paul had never been what you would call 'popular'. He supposed it was a side effect of his switching schools so often. Even so, he never really harbored a desire to be part of the 'in' crowd. The idea had never appealed to him. But now that he found himself in a situation where people seemed to notice his existence, he had to admit that he liked it.

* * * * *

"Are you up for a walk?" G asked as he approached Paul in the hallway.

"Yeah. I guess." Paul said with surprise at the strange question.

"There's a van that we can take to get a ride home. But on a day as nice as this, I feel like walking." G said happily.

Paul broke into a smile at G's infectious good mood and followed along.

* * * * *

When G had asked him if he were up for a walk, Paul had assumed that he meant emotionally or temperamentally, not physically.

It was a LONG walk.

Even so, there was a chill in the air which was invigorating and autumn was in full force, creating nearly breathtaking scenery.

When they finally arrived at the house and walked around to G's 'room', they were surprised to find a note taped to the double doors.

The note simply instructed them not to change clothes and come directly to the study.

G and Paul stopped long enough to deposit their backpacks, then hurried through the hallway into the main house.

* * * * *

"Where have you been?" D demanded as they walked in.

'*Uh, oh. He's not happy.*'

'*It looks like now we get to see the dark side of D.*'

'*I hope it's not **too** bad. I really want to keep on liking him.*'

"We decided to walk home. Have you been out there? It's beautiful!" G said seriously.

D's serious mood gave way to a smile and he quietly admitted, "I suppose it is."

'*Wait.*'

'*What?*'

'*That's it?*'

'*I've seen kids get beat black and blue for a whole lot less.*'

'*G answers your question and you're fine with it?*'

'*I need some time to deal with this new concept.*'

"What did you need us for?" G asked curiously.

"While I was making plans for our trip, Beth mentioned that she and Paul don't have passports. So I pulled a few strings and I have someone waiting to take their

passport photos so we can get them rushed. We need to be going." D said as he stood from behind his desk.

"You don't have a passport?" G asked Paul in surprise.

'*Give me a break! We were lucky if Mom had enough money for gas to get to work!*'

'*Trips outside the **country** never really came up as a possibility.*'

'*Not even in my wildest dreams.*'

"I've never needed one." Paul finally responded.

From the expression on G's face, such a thing was nearly inconceivable to him.

'*We're from two different worlds.*'

'*Do we have enough in common to make things work?*'

'*Will we care enough to try?*'

"We can talk about it in the car." D said as he hurried past them.

"What about dinner? We're starving." G said quickly as he followed.

'*Okay. We **do** have things in common.*'

'*And G isn't hung up on the **rich** and **poor** thing.*'

'*I need to learn not to be touchy about it.*'

'*We come from different worlds.*'

'*So what?*'

'*I mean, what fun would it be if we were exactly the same?*'

"We'll pick something up in town." D said over his shoulder, then called into the lounge as he passed, "Beth! They're here! We're leaving!"

"On my way!" Paul's mother called as she hurried to join the group that was walking briskly toward the enormous front doors.

* * * * *

"I suppose that while we're out, we'd better go ahead and buy the things that we'll be needing for the trip. You'll need a variety of warm clothes to endure the climate on the Scottish highlands." D said frankly as he drove.

"It's not like we're going to be hiking to get there." G said frankly.

'*Scottish highlands...*'

'*Oh. My. God!*'

'*This is going to be amazing!*'

"No. But you still need to take the dank weather into account. Even inside, it's best to wear a few extra layers." D countered.

G reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"Would you mind taking Paul to buy his things? You know what he'll need." D asked his son hopefully.

'*Buy things for Paul?*'

'*Like some big charity case?!*'

'*Hold on...*'

'*Don't be touchy about it.*'

'*They're not saying that they need to buy poor little Paul new clothes because he doesn't have anything decent to wear.*'

'*We're going someplace cold. They're going to buy me warmer clothes. It's just that simple.*'

'*Chill.*'

"Yeah. No problem. And I was wanting to pick up an OVA to go with that classic anime series that I just bought." G said with a grin.

'*G, if I didn't love you before...*'

'*Oh crap! No, I didn't mean that!*'

'*Really!*'

'*I didn't.*'

'...'

'*Crap.*'

"Those things will rot your mind." D said in a tone of long suffering.

"Most things that are fun will do that." G said in his defense.

Rather than respond, D glanced at Paul in the rearview mirror and asked, "How was your first day of school?"

'*What?*'

'*Me?*'

'*What was the question?*'

"He's going to need a tutor." G said seriously.

"Oh? Is something wrong?" D asked with concern.

"Only that he's expected to already know stuff that he's never been taught before." G said frankly.

"I'll make arrangements for that. You're both going to be out of school all next week, so I'll set it up for as soon as we get back." D said seriously.

'*Just like that?*'

'*No screaming or threats about grades, just... Oh, I'll get you some help with that...*'

'*Freakin amazing!*'

"You can hang in there for two more days, can't you?" G asked Paul casually.

Paul thought about how the second half of his day had gone, then quietly responded, "Yeah. I think I'll be alright."

"Good." D said with satisfaction, then thought to ask, "Paul. Adoption. Yes? No? Maybe?"

"Huh?" Paul asked in surprise.

'*I think I missed a whole lot of something there.*'

'*I mean, did someone just bump the fast forward button and skip us into a whole new conversation without me noticing?*'

'*Adoption?*'

"We can't do anything until after the wedding, but be thinking about it. Would you like to be adopted? Would you like to have your name changed? Let me know." D said seriously.

G broke into laughter at Paul's flummoxed expression.

'*Adoption?*'

"Way to go, Dad! Skip the foreplay and go right for the goal!" G said in delight.

"It's worked for me, so far." D said, then glanced lovingly at Beth, at his side.

"Ewww! I did *not* need that mental image." G said with a grimace.

"You're the one who brought up 'foreplay'." D said in his defense.

G thought about it for a moment, then turned to Paul and said, "I *was* hungry, until he said *that*."

'*Adoption?*'

* * * * *

The stop at the photographer's took only a few minutes. Apparently, D had been able to arrange everything in advance and all they had to do was sit for the actual pictures.

From there, they went immediately to a nice restaurant. After all their rushing around, it was nice to be able to stop and catch their breath for a little while.

There was a little casual conversation before G finally asked his father, "Where did you two meet? You never said."

"Three, no, I guess it was *four* months ago, now, Beth and I noticed that we seemed to take lunch at the same time and since we both tended to sit at the lunch counter, more often than not, we'd be seated next to each other. We started talking. And one thing led to another..." D finished with a shrug.

"So Meg Ryan's right? It *can* happen just like that?" G asked with surprise.

'*A Meg Ryan reference?*'

'*Does G, perhaps, have some viewing habits that don't revolve around big boobed schoolgirls and giant robots?*'

'*Then again, I don't know what Meg Ryan's been up to in the last few years...*'

D and Beth broke into laughter at the same time at the question.

When their food arrived, the conversation turned to more general topics.

The shopping that followed was like a whirlwind.

The register totals were numbers that were beyond Paul's comprehension, but each time, G simply handed over his credit card as though it were an everyday happening.

Beyond that, Paul was overwhelmed by the sheer *volume* of what they purchased. He didn't have any idea of where they were going to put it all.

Finally, he concluded that D's car must be able to defy the laws of physics, because somehow, everything ended up fitting neatly into the trunk... or boot, as D referred to it.

As they were heading back to the house, Paul once again found himself questioning reality.

He had never before in his life had the experience of going into a store and being able to buy anything that caught his eye. Of course, he couldn't overcome a lifetime of conditioning, so he didn't really make any frivolous purchases. But, even so, being able to select the clothing and shoes that he wanted without regard to price was something beyond his wildest dreams.

G *did* have to nudge Paul a few times to get what he *wanted* rather than the cheapest option available. But, for the most part, Paul selected the things that he needed for the trip, picking out the color and style that he *really* wanted.

* * * * *

When they got back to the house, Paul was surprised to find that G had, indeed, bought the OVA that he had told his father about. It turned out that the DVD was a continuation of the classic anime that they had watched the previous evening.

At one point during the video, G shifted around on the couch and ended up with his head on Paul's lap.

It was totally innocent and Paul supposed that G might not even be aware of what he was doing, he was just trying to find a comfortable position.

After a moment to consider, Paul rested back, as his hand absently stroked G's hair.

More gore. More tentacles. More giant robots fighting. And, of course, more big boobed schoolgirls.

'*Like the song says "Sweet Dreams are made of this..."*'

* * * * *

The next morning, Paul and G woke, had breakfast, took their showers, then caught a ride in the van to school.

For whatever reason, Paul didn't feel the same anxiety that he had the day before about not understanding the lessons. Instead, he listened intently to the material that was being presented and started to get a sense of what they were studying... except the math. He still didn't have the first clue as to what that was about.

At lunch, he once again met up with G, Nazzy and Vinda. Where their lunch the previous day had been slightly tense, today it was as relaxed as if the four of them had been best friends forever.

The remainder of the school day flew by, as Paul began to relax around his new classmates and started forming relationships with them.

As they walked out of the school and started walking toward the van that would take them home, G spotted his dad's car.

* * * * *

As soon as they got into the car, G cautiously asked, "What's going on, Dad?"

"The three of us need to get fitted for suits." D said as he pulled away from the school.

"Ungh. I was trying to forget about that." G groaned.

'*I wonder if it's any more difficult than buying a pair of new pants...*'

'*Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever had **new** pants... just **used** pants that were **new** to me.*'

'*Oh, well. How bad could it be?*'

"Do you think I'll ever hear the end of it if your great grandmother sees you at the wedding looking less than respectable?" D asked frankly.

"I suppose not. But I don't have to like it." G reluctantly agreed.

"I'm not asking you to like it. I'm just asking you to do it." D said frankly.

"It's a deal." G said, then let out a long sigh of resignation.

"Are you okay, Paul?" D asked with concern.

"I've never done anything like this before. Is there anything I need to know?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. Just stand still while your measurements are taken. That's about it." D said frankly.

"Yeah. But first you try on about a dozen or so suits that all look just about the same to find the ones that you're going to get." G groused.

"I'm sure it'll go faster if you're not insisting that you want to be a cowboy." D said with a barely contained smile at his son.

Paul leaned over in his seat to look at G, in the front passenger seat, with question.

"That's not going to be a problem, this time." G quietly assured his father.

Paul settled back into his seat with a warm smile at the thought.

'*G as a cowboy...*'

'...*I bet that would be glorious.*'

* * * * *

Getting the suits fitted wasn't as bad as G had let on.

It was worse.

They were in the tailor's shop for *hours*.

D insisted that they try on ALL the available selections, many of them, multiple times.

It wasn't until the end of it all that the tailor thought to mention that he couldn't guarantee that he'd have all the suits altered by the following Monday.

For a moment, Paul thought D was going to lose his cool. But instead, D calmly told the tailor that he would pay an extra one *thousand* dollars, over and above the price of the suits if, and only if, ALL the suits were ready to pick up Monday afternoon.

The dollar signs that appeared in the tailor's eyes were evidence that the suits would be ready and waiting for them.

* * * * *

As they left the tailor's shop, all three of them were tired, irritable and quite hungry.

"Can we stop for something?" G whined on the way to the car.

"What are you hungry for?" D asked in a less than enthusiastic voice.

"I don't care. Anything." G said in frustration.

"How about you, Paul? What sounds good to you?" D asked with a half-hearted attempt at a smile in his direction.

"Pizza." Paul answered immediately.

'*Wait. Do rich people eat pizza?*'

'*Do they even know what it is?*'

'*Well, if I'm going to expose them to one thing from **my** culture, this is a pretty good one.*'

D seemed to consider as he climbed into the driver's seat, then turned to his son and asked, "Is that okay with you?"

"Anything." G reiterated.

"Pizza it is!" D said as he started the car.

* * * * *

When they arrived at the restaurant, Paul was surprised that it wasn't one of the fast food pizza chains. It was, in fact, an old fashioned, sit-down, Italian restaurant.

"Have we been here before?" G asked as they got out of the car.

"I don't think you have, but I've eaten here a few times." D said as he led the way.

Before they reached the front door, Paul caught the scent of something delicious. His stomach let out a loud growl to announce that it had also noticed.

"Mr. D! How good to see you again! Come, I have your usual table." The host said happily and immediately ushered them through the moderately busy restaurant to a secluded booth.

"A few times?" G asked his father curiously.

"Maybe more than a few." D said with a guilty smile.

* * * * *

The pizza was nothing short of perfection.

Paul ate until he was sure that he was going to explode. And, even then, he wished that he could eat more. It was just that good.

"I feel like I could sleep for a week." G groaned as they slowly walked toward the car.

"You've just got one more day of school, then you're going to be off for an entire week." D said as he opened his car door.

"Right." G said unenthusiastically.

"And don't forget that you're going to need to get your homework from all your classes, so you won't be behind when we get back." D said frankly.

"Ungh!" G said as he dropped into the passenger seat.

"Paul... I don't know what to say in your case. I think we'll just get you sorted out when we get back." D said frankly.

"I think I'll just take my school books with me so I can try to get caught up to where they are in my classes." Paul said thoughtfully, then added, "Except in math. I can't even figure out the first page of the book. I'm going to need help on that."

"Like I said, we'll work on getting you a tutor when we get back. But maybe, until then, you could get G to help you. He's always been good at math. Maybe he'll be able to explain things to you." D said honestly.

"We can try." Paul said uncertainly, not wanting to commit G to doing something that he might not want to do.

* * * * *

"How are you doing?" Paul asked, as they finally walked into G's room.

"Okay, I guess. I just hate doing boring stuff like that." G said as he walked directly to his bedroom, shedding his school uniform along the way.

"Well, that should be it, shouldn't it? I mean, that was the last really boring thing that we're supposed to do, right?" Paul asked hopefully.

"No. There are probably going to be lots of really boring things, one after another, before this whole wedding thing is done." G said frankly.

Paul froze in place when he realized that G wasn't stopping his undressing.

"I'm not mad at you." G said as he turned to face Paul, then continued, "I'm not mad at anyone, really. I just... it puts me in a bad mood."

"Yeah. I get that." Paul said slowly as he watched G take off his underwear.

"Thanks." G said with a smile, then glanced down at his naked body before looking back at Paul and asking, "Care to join me?"

Paul nearly broke into laughter at the casually asked question, but was able to hold it back and instead answered, "Yeah. Okay."

* * * * *

Paul was nervous at first, but in time, he more or less forgot about his nudity as he focused more and more of his attention on the horrible Japanese cartoon that G had put in the player.

It was ghastly. And not in a gory or exciting way. The animation was annoyingly bad, the story made no sense at all, the dialogue was idiotic and it seemed to go on and on from one embarrassingly bad episode to the next.

As Paul felt himself drifting into sleep, he had to admit that he kind of missed the big boobed schoolgirls and their giant robots.

* * * * *

"Good morning." G said softly, causing Paul to open his eyes.

"Good morning." Paul said with a smile.

"You know, if we kissed right now, things might get kinda weird between us." G said frankly.

'*Okay!*'

'*I'm awake!*'

'*I guess the ball's in my court.*'

"I'm the uptight one. I think that if I were going to get weird about things, I would have done it by now." Paul said honestly.

'*That was a nice, respectable return.*'

'*If I'm going to keep using tennis metaphors, I really should learn more about the game.*'

"You've been close a few times, haven't you?" G asked with a smile.

"A few." Paul admitted.

"So it's okay?" G asked cautiously.

"Just, if it does get weird for a little bit, don't give up on me. Okay? It doesn't have anything to do with how I feel about you." Paul asked hopefully.

"What does it have to do with?" G asked curiously.

"How I feel about me, maybe... I don't know." Paul said honestly, then added, "I just don't want you to think that if I'm acting strange that I'm actually thinking '*Ewww gross!*'"

"Yeah. Okay." G quietly agreed.

After a moment of staring into each other's eyes, Paul quietly asked, "Are you going to do it or not?"

"I guess I'd better." G said with a grin, then moved in to give Paul a delicate, gentle kiss.

A sudden blaring beeping sounded as soon as their lips met.

"What?! Do you have a virgin alarm?" G asked as he backed away.

Paul broke into laughter at the question.

G climbed over the back of the couch and turned off the alarm clock.

"We'd better get dressed and get in to breakfast." G said regretfully.

"This, first." Paul said as he climbed over the couch, then pulled G into a firm kiss.

* * * * *

After breakfast, G and Paul had their showers... separately... but each enjoyed the view when the other came out of the bathroom.

The fact of the matter was that they were on a somewhat strict timetable and didn't have time to do more than look.

At school, the morning passed without incident, the only thing on Paul's mind the entire time was the sensation of that kiss.

When the lunch bell finally sounded, Paul automatically went to the cafeteria where he knew that he would find G, Nazzy and Vinda.

As Paul walked into the cafeteria, there was a sudden roar of 'Surprise!'.

Yes, he was, in fact, surprised. He was pretty sure that his heart might have skipped a beat or two.

'*What does a heart attack feel like?*'

'*What were the symptoms, again?*'

Then he was uncertain if the surprise had been intended for him.

He looked around, there was no one behind him, and everyone seemed to be focused on him.

Nazzy walked up to stand beside him, then said, "Paul. I'm sorry it took us a few days to put this together, but we just wanted to welcome you. Everyone! This is

Paul, he's G's new brother. If you haven't talked to him yet, make sure you introduce yourselves!"

Just that moment, Paul would have been quite content to crawl under the nearest table and die.

"C'mon. We got you cake." Nazzy said with a grin at him, then led him by the arm over to the table where Vinda and G were sitting.

"Surprise." G said with a grin.

"Did you know about this?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Vinda told me about it during second period." G said frankly.

Before Paul could question further, he was approached by a series of people welcoming him to the school.

* * * * *

Afternoon, after school, dinner... they all flew by.

Paul was riding the high of having a truly *good* day.

"It's nice to see you happy, like this." G said as they sat on the couch.

"I'm not used to feeling this way. How can I keep this feeling?" Paul asked curiously.

"Short answer, you can't. Life is full of hills and valleys. You just seem to have found a pretty nice mountaintop, today." G said with a grin.

"I'm scared that I'm going to wake up and find out that this was all a dream." Paul said honestly.

> '*There, I did it. If this is really a dream, then saying so will probably cause it to all come crashing down...*'
>
> '*Is it too late to take it back?*'

"Well, if that happens, then I guess that when you wake up you'll just have to work to make it a reality." G said warmly.

"How do you do it? You seem to be happy pretty much all the time." Paul asked curiously.

"Wasn't that you who was with me yesterday, at the tailor's shop?" G asked cautiously.

Paul laughed, then said, "That would have made anyone miserable, even the perpetually happy G."

The smile fell off G's face, and Paul noticed.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked curiously.

"A smile doesn't always mean that you're happy. Sometimes it's there to hide that you aren't." G said quietly.

After a moment to consider that, Paul quietly asked, "Wanna talk?"

"No. Not really." G answered honestly.

"Wanna kiss?" Paul asked with an impish grin.

"Who's the alpha, here?" G asked with the beginning of a smile.

"You are. Without a doubt." Paul said before hooking an arm around G and pulling him close.

"Okay. Just so we're clear on that." G said before giving up his resistance.

'*Dream or not, just as long as we get to keep on doing this, I'm fine with it.*'

* * * * *

Although both boys might have been willing to do more, they were also equally uncertain if doing too much, too soon might damage or destroy their developing relationship.

In the end, they did nothing more than kiss. However, when they went to sleep that night, they *did* sleep cuddled together.

* * * * *

"It's Saturday. What are we supposed to do today?" Paul asked curiously, as he stroked G's head, which was laying on his chest.

"Whatever we want, mostly." G said frankly.

"Mostly?" Paul asked curiously.

"Dad might have something planned, especially with us leaving next week. But I don't think he's said anything to me about it." G said honestly.

"Let me out. I need to pee." Paul said as he started to sit up.

"Kiss first." G said with a grin.

Paul obliged with a quick kiss, then hurried to get off the couch.

* * * * *

"So, Dad, do you have any big plans for today?" G asked, once they were all seated around the dining room table.

"I have about a thousand little odd and end things that I need to get put in order before I leave." D said honestly.

"I meant, do you have any plans *for us*?" G asked frankly.

"Not a plan, so much, but if you wanted to, we could go out and play with the trains this afternoon." D said with a smile.

"We haven't done that for a while, and Paul hasn't seen them yet. Yeah. Let's do that." G said happily.

"What do you guys say we do that after lunch?" D asked with an honest smile.

"Yeah. We'll be there." G said confidently.

Paul watched the exchange silently. Although he hadn't ever personally played with anything like model cars or trains, he'd seen them before. He never could figure out what anyone could find to enjoy about them.

"Did you boys remember to get all your school work for while you'll be gone?" Beth asked curiously.

"I got mine." G said simply.

"I'm still not to the point where I'm able to do the lessons that they're assigning, right now. But I brought my books so that I can maybe get closer to being caught up before we get back." Paul said seriously.

"I've already talked to the school and they know that I'm going to be hiring a tutor for Paul, so they'll be willing to be flexible until he's had a chance to catch up." D interjected.

"Paul, just be sure to let us know if you need anything, alright?" Beth asked her son gently.

"I will." Paul assured her.

> '*It's weird. It's not them yelling at me, telling me that I need to get better grades, **or else**. It's me, saying that I'm going to handle it and them offering their help and support.*'
>
> '*I think this is beyond any dream that I could have come up with...*'
>
> '*...an alternate reality, maybe?*'

* * * * *

At lunch, both father and son seemed to be excited by the prospect of playing with their trains, which increasingly baffled Paul. He was happy enough to tag along, if nothing else, to enjoy their enjoyment. But he fully expected that after a few minutes that he would probably be bored.

"You're going to love this." G said as he led the way out the back door of the house (which happened to be normally sized), and across the expanse of wide open lawn.

"Where are we going?" Paul asked curiously.

'*Down the rabbit hole?*'

'*Through the looking glass?*'

'*Note to self: Beware the Red Queen.*'

"It's right over there, that out building." D said as he pointed.

The building was just coming into view, having been on the other side of a slight rise.

"How big is this place, anyway?" Paul asked as he looked around.

"Just over a thousand acres." D said casually.

Paul didn't have any way of responding to that because the scale of it was too immense for him to really comprehend.

* * * * *

When they walked into the building, it took a moment for Paul's eyes to adjust to the much dimmer light. But when his eyes finally *did* adjust, he had to blink his eyes to confirm what he was seeing.

Trains.

Real, full sized, trains.

On tracks.

"These are steam engines. One of these days, when we can spare the time, we'll go ahead and fire one up for you and take it out for a spin." D said cheerfully.

"A spin?" Paul asked in astonishment.

"Yeah, this track runs all the way out to the lake at the far side of the property." G said happily.

"Lake." Paul parroted.

"Hey, Dad. Is it okay if I fire mine up?" G asked hopefully.

"That's fine. But remember that you have to stay out here with it until the pressure's down to a safe level. You can't just walk off and leave it." D said firmly.

"I won't." G promised, then turned to Paul and quickly said, "Come on!"

Paul glanced at D uncertainly, then walked to follow G across the large building to the far side of the second steam locomotive.

'*Their train set is made up of **real** trains.*'

'*Real, **actual** trains...*'

'*Just how freakin rich are these people?!*'

* * * * *

By the time Paul joined him, G was already working to get a fire started.

"What is it?" Paul asked cautiously.

To him, it looked like a church's pipe organ and one of the steam locomotives had sex... and this thing, whatever it was, was the resulting offspring.

"It's a calliope. It's real! Dad bought it for me and we restored it." G said proudly.

"What do you need for me to do?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Give me a minute to get the fire started, then you can start handing me firewood. Mine's woodburning, instead of coal." G explained.

'*Yeah, because burning coal in your pipe organ would just be silly.*'

* * * * *

When G said that he was ready, Paul brought him pieces of wood so that G could feed them into the base of a large cannister which looked something like a primitive water heater. And, from what little Paul knew about steam engines, that's probably what it was.

G kept checking the gauges of the thing until he finally announced, "It's ready!"

"Ready for what?" Paul asked cautiously.

G flashed him a huge grin, then ran around to the other side of the wagon and opened a panel to reveal something like a piano keyboard.

Before Paul could do much more than register the fact, G began to play.

The first steam whistle to go off nearly made Paul jump out of his skin and pee his pants simultaneously. He had never in his life heard such a loud noise.

When the next whistle went off, in a different pitch, Paul realized that what G was playing was a legitimate musical instrument, albeit, an insanely loud one.

As he listened, Paul flashed back on the 'Dark Carnival' motif in G's room and thought that the calliope fit in with it perfectly (and loudly).

When G finally finished, he walked to Paul and said... something.

"Huh?" Paul screamed in response.

G rolled his eyes, then said something else.

"Huh?" Paul screamed again.

It was only then that G realized that Paul wasn't kidding.

G chewed his lower lip for a moment as he considered what he should do, then took off running, to the other side of the building.

"Huh?" Paul called after him.

'*If this were a dream, **that** would've woken me up. No doubt.*'

'*So, I guess **that's** settled.*'

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Paul?" D asked with concern.

"It's still ringing, but I can hear you now." Paul said honestly.

"Next time, he'll have to move the calliope outside before playing it. Even without the noise problem, depending on which way the wind is blowing we can get smoked out of here." D said honestly.

"He's not mad at me, is he?" Paul asked cautiously.

D chuckled, then said, "He's probably worried that you're mad at him... for destroying your eardrums."

"No. I'm glad that he shared that with me. Just, next time, I'll have to remember to wear earplugs or something." Paul said honestly.

"I'll see to it that we have some on hand before the next time." D assured him.

"Thanks for taking me out here and showing me this." Paul said sincerely.

"Remember, next time, I'm going to get you to help me fire it up. We're going to take this thing for a spin." D said happily.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Paul said with a smile, then added, "I'd better get back to G before he thinks that I'm mad at him or something."

'*Even if my mom weren't going to marry him, I'd still want him to be my... I don't know if I'll ever be able to call him that.*'

'*But if I were ever going to call anyone **that**, I would want it to be him.*'

* * * * *

As they walked into the living room of G's 'room', G quietly asked, "Are your ears still ringing?"

"Yeah. But it's better than it was. Don't worry about it." Paul said with a smile.

"I'm sorry. Okay?" G asked anxiously.

"Okay." Paul said with a reassuring smile, then moved in to give G a firm kiss.

The kiss didn't last that long, but the hug that accompanied it continued on and on.

"I'm okay. Really." Paul quietly soothed.

"I never want to hurt people." G said as he enjoyed the hug.

"You bring joy into the life of everyone who knows you." Paul said softly.

"Maybe you don't know the *real* me." G said in almost a whisper.

"And maybe I do." Paul countered gently.

'*I could stay like this forever.*'

* * * * *

That night was more about comfort than passion.

There was the occasional kiss, but mostly holding each other through the next animated series that G wanted to share with Paul.

This one was better than the last one. Not great, but better.

* * * * *

After waking, the boys went to the main house to find breakfast on the dining room table, along with a note, telling them that D and Beth were going out for the day.

Paul looked at the food on the dining room table, all of it still piping hot, and wondered, not for the first time, who had prepared it.

"That's cool." G finally said, then asked, "What do you want to do today?"

"I don't know. What sounds good to you?" Paul asked in return.

"Let's get naked and watch videos." G said with a smile.

"We did that a couple nights ago." Paul said cautiously, not sure if he were missing something.

"Yeah. And it was nice, wasn't it? Wanna do that again? All day?" G finished with a smile.

Paul thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah, that actually sounds kinda great."

G smiled with accomplishment, then tucked into his meal.

* * * * *

For as tranquil as Sunday had been, Monday came as something of a rude shock.

Since they would be leaving for the airport early on Tuesday morning, all their packing and preparations would need to be taken care of that day.

At breakfast, D reminded the boys that they would need to go to the tailor's shop later in the day to pick up their suits.

Beth then added that she was going to need to stop by the bridal shop for her wedding dress.

That caught Paul by surprise.

Although he had intellectually known that his mother was getting married in less than a week, somehow the reality of it didn't kick in until she talked about her wedding dress.

* * * * *

Paul and G weren't too worried about needing to pack for the trip until it actually came time to do it. That's when they came to the realization that Paul didn't have ANY actual luggage.

For all the times Paul had moved from apartment to apartment, he had always done so using cardboard boxes and plastic bags.

As soon as the discovery was made, they returned to the main house and Beth realized that she, too, had no luggage, whatsoever.

Although D suggested that Beth drive the boys into town to get the luggage and that G use his credit card to pay for it, Beth was kind enough to point out that D needed to be present to try on his new suits at the tailor's shop.

With that decided, everyone went to work, doing as much as they could, within the constraints of their individual circumstances, until it was time to go into town.

* * * * *

Along with getting the luggage and picking up the suits and the wedding dress, G also suggested that they take a moment to buy a few 'comfortable' things to wear during their trip. At first the adults resisted the idea, but G finally won them over by reminding them about how long they would be traveling, not only in the air, but also waiting in one airport after another, for their connecting flights to depart. It's miserable enough to have to do it at all, but it's that much worse when you have things binding, chafing, riding up, falling down or refusing to stay fastened.

When they got back to the house, it was a mad dash to get everything done that they needed to before the end of the night.

As soon as the last suitcase was packed and put on the stack by the front door, the boys collapsed on the couch, in front of the TV. Something was playing, something animated, for certain, an anime, most likely, but Paul was too exhausted to even pay attention to it.

Both Paul and G automatically snuggled together and almost immediately fell into a restful, and much needed, sleep.

* * * * *

They were up well before sunrise, but due to all their hard work the night before, they had time to enjoy a delicious and satisfying breakfast before having to load the car and leave for the airport.

Once again, Paul wondered who had prepared their wonderful meal, and very nearly asked, but when D started outlining their proposed arrangements for the day, it slipped his mind.

* * * * *

Paul was nervous.

Although he wouldn't admit it to anyone else, since he had never flown before, he didn't know how he was going to handle the experience.

The first flight was, by far, the most terrifying.

Part of that was the fact that it *was* his first flight.

But to compound the anxiety, they were taking a commuter flight to a larger, regional airport. The little two-engine mosquito of a plane seemed to jump and drop, tip and tilt, for no apparent reason.

When he first got onto the plane, Paul was very careful to school his expression and not divulge just how scared he was.

By the time they landed, he didn't care who knew, and he wanted to kiss the solid, unmoving ground beneath his feet to celebrate their landing.

The wait time between the commuter and the commercial passenger jet wasn't terribly long. The parents had time to sip some coffee and the boys were each able to enjoy an insanely sweet, hot, gooey cinnamon roll that was similar in size and weight to a newborn baby.

* * * * *

By the time they landed at the next airport, Paul was more or less a seasoned traveler.

Of course, it could be that the amount of sugar he ingested at the previous airport was enough to nearly put him into a coma. Either way, Paul's anxiety was nearly gone and he was able to relax enough that he fell asleep for part of the flight.

It didn't hurt that they were traveling first class, so they didn't have to suffer some of the discomfort that other passengers, farther back in the plane, might be experiencing.

At this airport, they stopped for a while to have a nice relaxed early lunch, mainly because they had two and a half hours before their next flight was supposed to take off.

Paul was beginning to understand what G had meant about traveling being miserable. But he had to admit that it would be that much more so if he were wearing uncomfortable clothes.

* * * * *

As they started their trans-atlantic flight, Paul took one of his schoolbooks out of his carry-on luggage. The boredom of travel had finally driven him to it.

The seven hour flight from New York to London provided Paul plenty of time to work his way through several subjects and begin to get a foundational understanding of the classes that he was enrolled in.

At one point, about three hours in, G even borrowed one of his class books, just for something to do.

Of course, all schoolwork was temporarily suspended when the inflight movie started. It turned out to be a comic book superhero movie, as so many were of late. But the best part about it was that neither Paul nor G had seen it before.

It wasn't *exactly* the same as anime, but it was closer than Paul would have expected.

* * * * *

When their flight arrived in England, it was well after dark and late, at least according to the local time.

That was perfectly fine with Paul.

Even though he had done very little in the way of physical activity that day, he felt as though he could easily sleep for a week.

D had already arranged everything, so their limo driver was waiting for them and very skillfully and professionally attended to their luggage.

* * * * *

Paul was surprised that when they got into the back of the limousine, that there was a picnic basket waiting for them, filled nearly to overflowing with all kinds of delectable treats.

As the limo ride wore on, Paul better understood *why* the food had been provided. They kept driving and driving, for nearly two hours, before finally arriving at their hotel. If the driver hadn't provided the basket of food, all of them might well have withered away to nothing.

* * * * *

The hotel room was posh, no doubt.

The staff were courteous and accommodating.

Paul and G couldn't really find anything wrong with it, except... that they had been given separate rooms.

So, that night, as tired as they were from traveling, and as nice and comfortable as their beds were, neither of them slept worth a damn.

* * * * *

Beth was full of good cheer the next morning, nearly 'glowing'. D was happy to see that she was happy. The boys... not so much.

Neither slept well. Neither was in a good mood. And they both gave the same blank disbelieving stares at D when he announced that they were going to spend the day touring London. With looks alone, they questioned D's fitness as a father, his sanity, and his value as a human being.

Nonetheless, they dutifully carried on with preparing. They had breakfast in the hotel, then piled into the limousine to see the sights.

Paul's mood brightened as he began to get into the spirit of the occasion. It took longer for G to come around, but as he watched Paul's childish wonder grow, he warmed to the experience.

They visited the Tower of London, saw Westminster Abbey, Big Ben, and St. Paul's Cathedral, and even witnessed the Changing of the Guard ceremony at Buckingham Palace.

As the day drew to a close, they were all well and truly exhausted, but in a good way.

* * * * *

Paul had just finished climbing into bed when he heard a light tapping on his door.

"Come in." He said quietly, hoping beyond hope that it was G.

There was a long quiet moment, then the door opened just enough for G to peek inside.

"Is it okay if I come in?" G asked uncertainly.

'*Silly question.*'

"Yeah. Of course." Paul said with a smile.

"I'm not... I mean, I don't *need* people. I'm okay being alone..." G said with difficulty.

'*G being uncertain is a rare sight.*'

'*I'm honored that he trusted me enough to allow me to see it.*'

Paul tried to restrain his smile as he said, "Why don't you climb in here with me and tell me about it."

"Okay. Yeah." G said with a grin.

* * * * *

The wakeup the next morning was rude and unwelcomed.

Regardless of their activities in the previous days, the fact of the matter was, it was just too flippin early.

As each of them dragged their zombified selves down to the restaurant to have breakfast, it was apparent that none of them wanted to be up, right then.

"We have to catch an early flight. There should be a car waiting for us when we arrive, and that will take us to Darroch Castle." D explained between sips of coffee.

"Castle, as in, a *real* authentic *castle*?" Paul asked to confirm.

"It's been our family home for... a while, now. My parents and grandparents live there, to oversee the place. And one day, when we're ready to retire, your mother and I might end up moving there, too." D finished with a smile at his bride-to-be.

"Really? That's your family home? You don't sound Irish." Paul said in confusion.

'*What's that look for?*'

'*Did I say something wrong?*'

"Scottish... there's a difference." D said with a wince, then continued, "Our family's from Darroch, but I was born and raised in the states, just like G was. We return to the Scottish highlands every so often, as we are able, to visit with family and restore the sense of having a foundation, of knowing where we came from."

"Must be nice." Paul said under his breath and flashed a dark look at his mother.

'*Yeah. I'm looking at you.*'

'*Even if you won't tell me about my dad, what about my grandparents or other family? It's not possible that we just sprang into existence out of nothing.*'

'*I want a **foundation**, too. I deserve it!*'

"Us sitting here, sipping coffee, isn't getting us any closer to Darroch." D said, not sounding to be much more enthusiastic than the others around the table.

* * * * *

Both boys were asleep before the limousine had left London, which was for the best.

Beth and D talked quietly about their plans and occasionally one or the other of them would stop and look with pride at their sleeping boys.

* * * * *

"You can't be serious. We're flying on *that*?" G asked when he got out of the limousine.

"Unless you can think of a better way for us to get there." D told his son frankly.

Paul alternated between pale white and pale green at the sight of the small plane.

'*Oh crap!*'

'*Not again!*'

'*Please don't make me!*'

"This made more sense than flying commercial. I chartered this flight so that we could transport all of our luggage and not be restricted by anyone else's timetable." D said seriously, then a look of question came over his face before he continued, "Why am I explaining this to you? Just get on the plane."

G rolled his eyes, then started walking to do as he was told.

"Is this thing safe?" Paul asked nervously.

"Yes. I promise." D said with a warm smile at the frightened boy.

'*Okay. This once. But if you get me killed, I'm never going to trust you again!*'

Paul tried to gather his courage, then followed G toward the small plane.

* * * * *

The flight was no more or less harrowing than the commuter flight had been on Tuesday. The prop engine plane seemed to jump and drop, pitch and yaw to the whims of the winds. Paul's gasps of fright and white knuckled grip on the armrests might have been funny in other circumstances, but G was unable to find any humor in the situation. About a half hour into their flight, G finally gave up his concerns about the probable reaction from the parents and leaned in to give Paul a reassuring kiss and cuddle him.

Paul's mother was a little bit surprised by the development, but D simply took gentle hold of her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

It turned out that G's kiss was all that Paul needed to break him out of the cycle of fear that he'd been trapped in. G had essentially 'blown his mind' which, under the circumstances, turned out to be a good thing.

* * * * *

"I don't remember this airport. How far is it from here?" G asked his father as they got off the plane.

"I don't know in miles, but I'm estimating two to three hours by car." D said frankly as he watched their luggage being unloaded.

"That's a lot faster than usual. We should get there while it's still light out." G said thoughtfully.

"That's my hope." D said with a smile at his son, then quietly asked, "About you and Paul... are you two..."

"Are we what, Dad?" G asked impatiently.

"Getting in too deep?" D asked with concern.

G thought about it for a moment, then quietly said, "Yeah. It looks that way."

"Remember, that I'm here if you need me." D said as he looked his son in the eyes.

G smiled at his father's reaction, then responded, "I know. Thanks."

* * * * *

"G has heard this before, but it won't hurt for him to hear it again." D said, then paused, since their driver seemed determined to find *every* pothole in northern Scotland.

'*That doesn't sound like something good.*'

"Where we'll be visiting is kind of remote..."

"...kind of." G chuckled at the understatement.

'*Well, we've been driving for about half an hour and haven't seen another living soul. If this* ***isn't*** *remote, I'm afraid of what is.*'

"It's a fourteenth century castle but, not to worry, it has been outfitted with a few of the 'conveniences' of the modern age." D said with a grin at G, then continued, "What I wanted to warn you about is, don't go off on your own. The Scottish highlands are strangely deceptive. It's incredibly easy to become disoriented and lost. And the weather is wholly unforgiving. Even when you're following a path or staying within sight of the castle, it's possible that a sudden mist or storm will come up and leave you with no points of reference for you to get yourself back to safety."

"If this were one of those old black and white horror movies, this is where he'd be warning us about the ghosts." Paul said to G with a grin.

'*Yeah. So I've watched a lot of black and white horror movies. We couldn't afford cable.*'

D smiled at the comment, then said, "The ghosts are family. You don't have to worry about them."

'*Was it just me, or did he say that a little bit **too** seriously?*'

"What about Nazzy and Vinda?" G asked suddenly.

"What about them?" D asked cautiously.

"Where are they? I thought you were going to invite them to the wedding!" G asked anxiously.

"You're only just thinking of this *now*?" D asked incredulously.

"I've had a lot on my mind." G said defensively, then asked, "Are they coming?"

"I made all the arrangements for them. Nazareth and Ravindra should arrive tomorrow afternoon or early evening. That will give them a chance to rest before the wedding ceremony." D said frankly.

"Oh, good. I just know that they really wanted to be here to see you get married." G quietly explained.

"Don't worry. Everything's been taken care of." D said confidently.

Paul was only marginally aware of the conversation. His attention kept being drawn to the breathtaking countryside outside his window.

* * * * *

Before long, both the boys were fast asleep as their drive continued on and on.

Beth and D sat, holding hands and watching their boys sleep. There were many things that needed to be done, and many more that needed to be discussed. But in that peaceful moment, neither wanted to do anything to disrupt the tranquility that they were feeling.

* * * * *

"Boys, we're here." D said gently, not wanting to wake the boys too abruptly.

"Already?" G asked sleepily.

"Check your stomach, I'm sure that *it's* not saying 'Already?'." D said fondly.

"I think it's still asleep." G said groggily.

"Paul?" Beth asked gently.

"Five more minutes." Paul grumbled.

D smiled at the response, then said, slightly louder than necessary, "Welcome to Darroch Castle."

Paul's eyes opened suddenly and he looked around with excitement.

In his wildest dreams, Paul couldn't have imagined a more picturesque location. It truly *was* a fourteenth century castle, nestled in amongst some of the most beautiful scenery in the world.

'*Oh my freakin God! A **real** castle! Not a movie set or a reproduction, but a **real** castle!*'

"G, would you take everyone inside while I show the driver where to put the luggage?" D asked his son hopefully.

"Yeah! C'mon! I want you to meet Grandma and Grandpa!" G said with uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

Paul smiled at his happiness and followed along.

'*It makes me happy to see him happy.*'

'*Is that too syrupy?*'

'*I don't care. It's true.*'

"I'll be in in just a moment." D assured his bride-to-be, then gave her a kiss before going to attend to the driver.

* * * * *

As Paul walked through the dim corridors, the thought came to him that the castle wasn't really all that different from the 'museum' back home. The walls were made of rougher stone than the smooth polished granite, but the overall effect was just about the same.

"Grandma!" G said joyfully as he ran into the great hall. The room was enormous and Paul couldn't help but flash back, yet again, to the old black and white horror movies.

"G! We didn't expect you this early. You've grown like a weed, you have." G's grandmother said with delight as G hugged her.

"D said that he was going to try that new airstrip that they opened earlier this year. It seems to have shaved a few hours off the travel time." An older gentleman said as he approached.

"Grandpa!" G said happily and immediately switched his hug.

Beth and Paul were watching the scene before them unfold with matching smiles.

'*This must be what he was like when he was five years old.*'

"Mom, Dad, I'd like for you to meet my fiancee, Beth and her son, Paul." D said as he walked into the room.

"Well! Look at you! Aren't you a pretty little thing. And I hear that you'll be havin a wee baby soon." D's mother said warmly.

"Yes, Ma'am. In about six months." Beth said timidly.

"Beth, Paul, may I introduce my parents, my father, J and my mother, B."

"You're kidding!" Paul blurted out in astonishment.

'*Oops! Mouth, you're not supposed to start working until I tell you to.*'

'*But still, G's grandparents and D's parents are J and B?*'

'*Well, I guess that means that there's only twenty-two members of the family left for me to meet.*'

"That's short for Jason and Beatrice." B said with a grin at him.

"Jay and Bea... Okay, I guess." Paul said reluctantly, not quite willing to accept it fully.

'*That makes sense, Jason is J, Beatrice is B, Gwayne is G... so what's D's real name?*'

"Your grandmother is taking a nap, right now. You'll be able to visit with her, later." D's father, J said with a smile.

At Paul's look of confusion, G explained, "He was talking to Dad about my great-grandma, Grandma Gruit."

"We'll have time enough to catch up on things. Just now you probably need to be resting up after your long trip. Come along, let me show you to your rooms. Everything should be ready." B fussed.

"Thanks, Mom." D said warmly as he followed behind her.

* * * * *

"I hope you boys won't be minding if we put you in a room together. We've got the whole family showing up in the next day or two." B asked as she slowly led the way up an enormous staircase.

"That'll be fine, Grandma." G said as he fought to restrain his smile.

'*Yeah. We'll find **some way** to make it work.*'

The place was big, huge in fact, and there was no doubt that the castle was, indeed, centuries old. But Paul couldn't help but notice that it was also immaculately clean.

"Boys, once we've been shown to our rooms, I'm going to need your help carrying up the bags." D said seriously.

"Okay, Dad." G answered easily.

"It's just down here. We even have electricity in this wing, now." B said happily.

"Dad's really getting the place fixed up." D said in an impressed tone.

"He's doing his best to make this old place functional. We don't have a lot of the new-fangled conveniences, but we have what's important." B said, then walked to a massive, nearly twelve foot tall, door and lifted the latch before forcing the door open with her shoulder. She fumbled just inside the door and turned on the light switch before stepping aside to allow everyone else to enter.

"It's beautiful." Beth gasped as she walked into the room.

Paul had another horror movie flashback as he cautiously scanned his surroundings.

"I'm glad you think so, dear. This will be your room." B said warmly.

"Thank you. I love it." Beth said excitedly.

"Boys, your room will be just across the hall." B said as she turned back toward the door.

"When's dinner? Paul and I are hungry." G asked hopefully.

"Well, you've just missed lunch and dinner's not for quite a while. When you're done helping your father with the luggage, why don't you come to the sitting room and I'll have a snack all laid out for you." B said warmly.

"Thanks, Grandma!" G said happily, then gave her another hug.

While he was doing that, Paul walked across the hall and lifted the heavy, cast iron latch on the door.

He did as B had done and pushed the door with his shoulder to open it. The weight of the door was nearly as astonishing as it's size.

The huge double doors back at the 'museum' didn't even compare.

He was surprised when he walked into the pitch black room. It took him a moment to remember to feel beside the door for the light switch.

When the lights came on, they revealed a very tidy, very elegant room. All that was missing was Boris Karloff, Lon Chaney and, of course, Bela Lugosi.

"Come on. Let's help Dad so we can eat." G said quickly from the doorway.

"Right behind you." Paul said as he turned to follow.

* * * * *

Paul had the sense that the luggage had gotten heavier since they had packed it. He also came to the realization that high ceilings meant more stairs. Those two things combined assured that when they finally found their way to the sitting room for their meal, that they were well and truly hungry.

"I thought I'd find you here." D said as he walked into the sitting room with Beth at his side.

"This is where the food is." G said unrepentantly.

Paul might have smiled at that if his mouth didn't already have a prior commitment.

"Beth and I need to go into town before it gets too late. Would you care to go with?" D asked casually, letting it be known with his expression that he didn't have a preference in the matter.

G looked at Paul and received a shrug in response.

"I think we've traveled enough for a while. We'll stay here." G said for both of them.

"Try to stay out of trouble." D said to his son with a smile.

"You know me." G said with a grin.

"That's why I said *try*." D responded, then turned to leave.

* * * * *

"Do you want to go exploring?" G asked Paul with a grin.

"What? Like where?" Paul asked cautiously.

'*Didn't D say something, just a little bit ago, about not getting into trouble?*'

"I don't know. Let's see if we can find any secret rooms or a dungeon or anything like that. How often do you get to explore *a castle*?" G implored.

'*Interesting point.*'

"Haven't you been here a bunch of times?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. But whenever I was here before, Dad thought that I was 'too young' to be left unattended. Now that I'm finally old enough, I want to check things out!" G said hopefully.

'*I'm not sure if **this** is the way to get your father to see you as being mature enough to be trusted.*'

"Yeah. Two teenagers exploring a fourteenth century castle on their own... what could go wrong?" Paul asked with a smile.

* * * * *

"Maybe it *used to be* a dungeon." G said as they looked around the basement room that they had discovered.

"Yeah. And *maybe* the castle was attacked by washers and dryers and this is where your family chose to imprison them." Paul retorted.

"Shut up." G grumbled, then led the way out of the room.

Paul smiled at the reaction as he followed, enjoying their exploration.

* * * * *

"No dungeon, no dragons, not even a troll. What a letdown." G said when they returned to their room.

"Actually, I'm kinda okay with not finding any of those things." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. Still, I grew up remembering this place with all the rooms that I couldn't explore. I've been dreaming about that stuff all my life. Now I'm here and... I guess it's disappointing." G said frankly.

"I guess at some point you have to give up on magic." Paul said regretfully as he sat heavily on the bed.

"I wouldn't go *that* far." G said as he sat beside Paul.

"What would you like to do, now?" Paul asked curiously. There wasn't any innuendo behind the words, just a simple, honest question.

After a moment to consider, G finally admitted, "A nap sounds *really* good right now."

"That's all I needed to hear." Paul said as he kicked off his shoes then scooted over on the bed.

A moment later G was snuggled in at his side.

As they were both drifting to sleep, G whispered, "All of this is magic."

* * * * *

Paul was awakened with a kiss.

"*Just like in the fairy tales*." Paul thought as he opened his eyes.

"Did you have a good sleep?" G asked with a lazy smile.

"Wonderful. And waking up like that was even better." Paul said happily.

"I was thinking that maybe, if it's not dark already, we could go exploring outside." G said hopefully.

'*I'm pretty sure I remember D saying something like, to not do* ***exactly*** *the thing you're talking about doing.*'

"Your dad sounded kinda serious when he said that stuff about us not leaving the castle." Paul said anxiously.

"*Our* dad. And that's not what I was talking about. There's a courtyard inside the castle walls where we can go without having to worry about getting lost." G explained.

'*I can work with that.*'

Paul thought for a moment, then broke into a smile before saying, "Yeah. That sounds good."

"We'd better hurry. It's not going to be light for much longer." G said as he stood.

It took a little effort for Paul to get up from the incredibly comfortable bed, but he was eventually able to catch up to G in the hallway.

* * * * *

"Toad!" G said happily as they walked into the great hall.

Paul was puzzled by the exclamation.

G ran across the room and hugged a small boy that Paul hadn't noticed.

"Paul, this is my cousin... *our* cousin, Toad." G said happily as he finally released the smaller boy from his hug.

'*Are you sure it's not T?*'

'*No, of course not. That would be silly.*'

As much as Paul wanted to ask about the name, he held his curiosity in check and simply said, "Hi, Toad."

The boy appeared to be about eight or nine years old and had the same dark hair as G's, although a little longer and somewhat wavy.

The boy looked at Paul, then slowly closed his large, dark eyes then, just as slowly, reopened them.

'*Well, he's not exactly a hookah smoking caterpillar, but I think we're almost in that neighborhood.*'

"Are your parents here?" G asked as he looked around.

Toad slowly looked upward, then turned his gaze back toward G.

"Yeah. They're probably tired from traveling. I'm glad you're here. Paul and I were about to go out to the courtyard to explore. Do you want to come with us?" G asked hopefully.

Toad slowly closed and reopened his eyes again, apparently in response to G's question.

'*The kid communicates with eye movements?*'

'*Curiouser and curiouser.*'

"Okay. You're probably tired, too. Maybe next time." G said with a smile, then moved in to give the boy another enthusiastic hug.

"I love you, Toad. Remember that." G said quietly, before releasing the boy.

Before Paul could formulate anything to say, G turned to him and quickly said, "C'mon. Let's go."

* * * * *

"Can't Toad speak?" Paul asked as they walked through nondescript corridors.

"Yeah. He can talk if he wants to, he just doesn't like to, sometimes." G answered casually.

G seemed to like the boy and accepted him just the way he was. Paul supposed that that was all he really needed to know. Besides, G *had* warned him that the people he'd be meeting might be a little... *peculiar*.

* * * * *

It seemed as though the courtyard led to another part of the castle that was no longer being used.

Not only was it getting too dark for them to do much more than a cursory inspection from the outside, but it was getting bitterly cold, too.

By the time they got back inside the house, Paul was incredibly grateful that they had taken the time to buy new warm clothes for their trip. Although he had been cold before, Paul couldn't remember ever having experienced what he would call 'bone chilling' cold.

* * * * *

By the time dinner was served, Paul was beginning to wonder about what kind of family his mom was marrying into. Upon entering the dining room, Paul had been introduced to Toad's parents, Kathryn and Horst, or 'Kat' and 'Horse' as they liked to be called.

Then, of course, there was Grandma Gruit. G hadn't been exaggerating about her in the slightest. She was thin and elegant with a permanent look of disdain etched on her face. When she spoke, it was with the greatest care and Paul couldn't help but get the sense that she was carefully choosing her words in an attempt to conceal her nefarious plans. She wasn't rude or threatening in any way, but one thing was for sure. Never, ever, under any circumstances, would he accept an apple from that woman.

The food that was served was a bit... old world, for Paul's unrefined tastes. It wasn't bad. He had no doubt that it was perfectly prepared in every detail. It's just that the *style* of food wasn't something that he was accustomed to.

Through the course of dinner, J and B kept the conversation going, filling people in about the goings on of absent relatives.

Paul couldn't force himself to pay attention to the talk about people that he had never met.

At one point during the meal, Paul looked across the table and found Toad smiling at him.

When Toad noticed, he immediately turned his attention back to his eating.

But Paul caught, in that one small glimpse of a smile, why G liked the boy so much.

* * * * *

"What do you think is taking your... our... *them* so long?" Paul asked G quietly as they went up the stairs.

"I think they went to town to get all their wedding stuff set up. I don't have any idea of what all is included in that, but it probably takes a while." G said frankly.

"I guess so." Paul said noncommittally.

"And there are some people in town who don't actually *like* us much. So that could slow them down." G added thoughtfully.

"Are we talking torches and pitchforks?" Paul asked cautiously as he stopped outside their bedroom door.

'*Unfortunately, that mental image came to me a bit too easily.*'

"More like trying to screw us out of our land and our money. I really don't know too much about that but Dad keeps up to date on it. You can ask him about it sometime if you want." G said as he lifted the latch and shouldered the door open.

"No. I guess I'm just nervous." Paul said as he followed G into the room.

"Is the weirdness getting to you, too much?" G asked with concern.

'*Bing. Bing. Bing. Got it in one! Tell him what he's won, Johnny!*'

"A little, maybe. I mean, I like your family. Everyone's been really nice. But you were right, those people aren't normal." Paul said frankly.

"From what I've seen of it, normal's not all it's cracked up to be." G said frankly.

Paul considered that for a moment before nodding his agreement.

'*I grew up normal.*'

'*Every day of my life, so far, has been normal.*'

'*So I can say with some certainty, normal sucks.*'

"And just so you know, you're doing fine. You're a little bit quiet, but I think everyone understands that. Just get to know them and pretty soon you'll see that most of them are alright." G said reassuringly.

'*I'm glad to know that I'm **passing***.'

'*Wait. What?*'

"Most of them?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Well, yeah. Uncle Pear is kind of a douchebag. And if I ever shook hands with Cousin Teek, I'd be sure to count my fingers when I got my hand back. But besides them, I think everyone's pretty decent." G said thoughtfully.

'*Good to know.*'

'*Filed for future reference.*'

"What about Grandma Gruit? Do you think she'd ever really hurt anyone?" Paul asked carefully.

"Yeah. But only if they gave her a reason to. Otherwise, she just polishes her mirrors and makes her potions, just like any other grandma." G said with a smile.

Paul wanted to laugh, but found that he couldn't.

* * * * *

Despite the nap in the car and another one in the afternoon, both boys were tired enough to fall asleep before their parents had arrived back at the castle.

The next morning, the boys woke to find that they were still dressed in their clothes from the day before.

"Where's the bathroom?" Paul asked curiously as he looked around the room.

"I don't know. I guess we'll have to go exploring to find out." G said as he sat up in bed.

'*You don't know? Aren't you supposed to be the fountain of all knowledge?*'

'*Fountain... Don't think about the water... trickling, tinkling, splashing...*'

'*Oh crap!*'

"I'm okay with exploring, *after* I've used the bathroom." Paul said honestly.

"I don't know where the bathroom is in this wing of the house. I haven't stayed here before. But if you really have to go, right now, then you can just use the bathroom downstairs." G said simply.

'*Here are our choices, we either run, right now. Or we can wait a minute and float down there.*'

"Yeah." Paul said as he slipped on his shoes.

"Hold up. I gotta go, too." G said quickly.

* * * * *

After their business was taken care of, G and Paul returned to the wing of the house where their bedroom was located, and did eventually find a very nice bathroom at the end of the hall. They didn't know how practical it was, considering that it was the only bathroom for seven bedrooms, but supposed that considering the alternative, it wasn't *too* bad.

They enjoyed a nice breakfast with Grandma B and Grandma Gruit, although Paul was careful not to leave his plate unattended in Grandma Gruit's presence, even for an instant. It's not that he didn't trust G's assessment of her, but he felt that it was best to err on the side of caution.

After breakfast, they decided to attempt another exploration of the ruins at the far side of the courtyard. However, about five minutes in, the frigid cold convinced them that the ruins were perfectly fine left undisturbed.

It wasn't until just before lunch that they caught up with their parents. Both boys were surprised to be told that they were expected at a practice ceremony in the great hall, promptly at five. When they inquired further, they were told that it was going to be a plainclothes run-through of the ceremony to get everyone's placement and cues sorted out before the actual ceremony the following night.

Neither boy complained, and although they wouldn't admit it to each other, both of them were kind of excited about being included in the ceremony.

* * * * *

With all the eccentricities of G's family, lunch was surprisingly unremarkable. People were laughing and talking and sometimes talking over each other. Everyone in the family that Paul had met, so far, attended the lunch as well as a few that he hadn't. It turned out that with so many people carrying on so many different conversations, that he didn't get the opportunity to be introduced. That actually suited him just fine.

At one point during the meal, Paul caught Toad smiling at him again and he automatically smiled back. This time, Toad continued to stare at him for a moment longer before shyly looking away.

The arrival of Nazzy and Vinda after lunch was something of a surprise to Paul. He had actually forgotten that they would be coming. But once the surprise had worn off, he was genuinely happy to see them. Not only were they people that he at least had *something* in common with, in that they went to the same school and were also

his own age, but most importantly, they weren't part of the family, so it didn't feel like it was just him against everyone else.

Paul and G helped Nazzy and Vinda take their things up to their room, while doing so, everyone gave a dramatic retelling about their experiences while traveling.

When they went down to the great hall together, it was nearing time for the wedding rehearsal. Nazzy and Vinda weren't taking part in the ceremony, but they were asked to sit back where the guests would be and let them know if they could see and hear well enough.

Paul was mostly just standing around, waiting to be told what to do. When that time finally came, he didn't like what he was told.

"You want me to walk up the aisle and drop flower petals?" Paul asked incredulously.

'*Flower child?*'

'*Do you want me to wear a ringlet of flowers in my hair and sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star when I get there, too?*'

'*Damn it, Mom. I'm* ***fifteen****!*'

"Well, D is going to have G serve as his best man, and I wanted you included in the wedding, too." His mother explained.

"Mom. I'm giving you away. I don't care what the ceremony says about it, I'm your family, that's my job. If you need someone to throw flower petals, why not ask Toad. I bet he'd do a good job." Paul said firmly.

Beth looked at D for a moment with uncertainty, then finally asked, "Would you like to walk me up the aisle, too?"

"Yeah. I'd like that." Paul said with a smile.

'*Whew! Crisis averted.*'

'*Sorry, Toad.*'

'*I'll find a way to make it up to you.*'

"Do you want me to ask Toad for you?" G asked his father quietly.

"No. Let's just skip the flower petals. Just my luck, someone would slip and fall on them and break their neck on our special day." D said honestly.

"Maybe he could be the ring bearer." G suggested carefully.

"If he eats it, you're going to be grounded... forever." D said firmly.

"Toad will probably be happier just *watching* the wedding, anyway." G said quietly.

* * * * *

Once everyone's roles were defined, all of them took their places.

"Where's Uncle Neese?" D asked as he looked around.

"He probably fell asleep, again." B said in frustration as she went to look for him.

"Maybe we should have someone else perform the ceremony." D said anxiously.

"Great-great-Uncle Neese is the oldest member of the family. Unless he declines, it's his rightful honor." J said seriously.

"Is he a minister or something?" Paul asked his mother quietly.

"We had the *legal* wedding before a judge, yesterday, when we were in town. We'll be having the wedding *ceremony* tomorrow night." D explained.

"And you don't have to have any special certification or anything to perform the ceremony." Beth added simply.

"I found him." B said as she helped an extremely elderly man into the room.

"Are you alright, Uncle Neese? We don't have to do this right now if you're not feeling up to it." D said frankly.

"I'm feeling fine, I just went to the kitchen because I wanted a pickle." Uncle Neese said as he tottered along, toward the front of the room.

"Okay, everyone, take your places! To begin, Uncle Neese will already be up here to officiate..."

* * * * *

"Way to go, Paul!" Nazzy said as soon as the practice ceremony was over.

"Yeah. Way to speak your mind!" Vinda added happily.

As G approached, he didn't say a word, but the look in his eyes told Paul everything he needed to know. Knowing that G was proud of him made his world feel complete.

"So, did someone say something about us having food after this thing? I'm starving." Nazzy asked seriously.

"Yeah. It's probably already on the table. This way." G said as he led the way.

* * * * *

Paul, G, Nazzy and Vinda stayed up later than any of them really needed to, but it was refreshing to have some lighthearted fun among a group of friends.

It was a somewhat unfamiliar thing for Paul, given his previous circumstances, and that night he decided that he very much *would* like to become used to it.

* * * * *

Paul woke with G curled into his side and felt that the world was honestly a beautiful place to be.

Although his stepfather-to-be appeared to have more money than God, the money played such a small part in their daily lives that it really wasn't a consideration. The way that D accepted him and seemed to care for him filled a void that Paul had carried all of his life.

Then there was G. Paul couldn't deny his feelings any longer. He was in love. But the strange thing was that after meeting Nazzy and Vinda and hearing about their former relationship with G, Paul had come to the realization that his relationship with G wasn't the center of his world. If something happened that they didn't work out for some reason, Paul would be sad, of course, but in time, he would be fine. And, hopefully, they would be able to maintain some sort of friendship as G, Nazzy and Vinda had done.

Finally, there was G's family. There was no doubt that the people were crazy as bedbugs. But they were all so nice and accepting of him, a total stranger, and welcomed him into their family. It would be the height of ingratitude for him to do less than accept every crazy insane last one of them.

"You're thinking loud enough to wake the dead." G mumbled into Paul's chest.

"I was just thinking about how much I like your family." Paul said as he began stroking G's hair.

"*Our* family. Go back to sleep." G said as he snuggled in a little tighter.

"*Our* family." Paul whispered as he closed his eyes.

* * * * *

There were about a million things that needed to be done to prepare for a wedding. And all of them appeared to be being done by people rushing in different directions.

"Watching them, rushing around like that, makes me tired." Vinda said with a sigh.

"You'd better not let them hear you say that or they'll put you to work." G said frankly.

"You know, I'm going to spend one of my weekend days here with you and the other on flights trying to get back home in time for school." Vinda said with a glance at him.

"Are you sorry you came?" G asked, quite seriously.

"No. I really want to be here. I'm just saying that I'm going to be wiped out when I get back." Vinda said frankly.

"When are *we* going back?" Paul asked curiously.

"I don't think Dad ever said. We might want to check with him about that." G said thoughtfully.

"Nah. What fun would that be? Let it be a surprise." Paul said with a grin.

"Um, you've got an excuse and a tutor. I'm going to have to make up whatever I missed." G said frankly.

Paul turned to Nazzy and Vinda before saying, "He's always so serious."

"Cold cuts for lunch! Make sure you eat your fill, dinner is the reception following the ceremony." B called out as she rushed across the room, carrying a potted plant.

Nazzy glanced at Vinda and extended his elbow as he asked, "Shall we?"

Vinda broke into a grin and placed a hand on the elbow as she said, "We shall."

G and Paul both chuckled at the performance as Nazzy and Vinda slowly walked away, with regal bearing befitting a reigning monarch.

G smiled at Paul as he quirked an eyebrow, then raised his elbow.

Paul grinned at him then followed Vinda's example and allowed G to escort him into an elegant, refined, cold cut lunch.

* * * * *

The frenetic activity before lunch was nothing compared to what followed.

People that Paul had never seen before kept appearing and all of them seemed determined that theirs was the most important job in the entire wedding.

"C'mon. It's time for us to get into our suits." G said, snapping Paul out of his mental wandering.

"It's still over an hour away." Paul said distractedly.

"Yeah, but we have to get naked, then get dressed. If we go, *right now*, we might be able to work one more step into that process." G said urgently.

Paul broke into a smile, then said, "Let's hurry."

'*That's why I love him.*'

'*Yeah. I said it. I love him.*'

'*Hopefully, soon, I'll find a way to say it aloud.*'

* * * * *

In the short time that Paul and G had been 'together', they hadn't ever really *been* together. They got naked, they kissed, they snuggled... and the next thing they knew, they were waking up.

When they got up to their room, both of them shed their clothes almost before the door was closed.

"Who did that?" Paul suddenly asked, when he saw that their suits had been laid out on the bed for them.

"Dunno." G said before moving in to give Paul a long, firm kiss.

Any further questions fled Paul's mind as he became lost in the sensation of long *naked* kiss.

Thanks to their recent period of celibacy, both were exceptionally ready to take things to another level. So, as things arose, they were dealt with in short order. Admittedly, things were a bit awkward. But with luck, they were going to have the opportunity to perfect their technique in the days, weeks, months and years to come.

* * * * *

'*Seven bedrooms.*'

'*One bathroom.*'

'*Seriously?*'

'*It doesn't sound all **that** crazy, until you take into account that all the people in all seven bedrooms are trying to get ready to attend a wedding... at the same time.*'

Paul had rediscovered his nervousness before making his way downstairs.

People were still milling around, still gathering, so Paul had time to collect himself.

It wasn't as though *he* were the one getting married, after all.

In fact, all he had to do was walk his mother up the aisle and stand aside. It's not like he had any words to memorize or anything to do.

"Are you ready?" G asked as he approached.

"Yeah. I think so. Have you got the ring?" Paul asked carefully.

"Yes. Dad's asked me, like, six times already." G said with a slight roll of his eyes.

"Look at this! It looks like you're having an old fashioned Halloween wedding! I guess my invitation must have gotten lost in the mail!" A woman said theatrically as she entered the room. She was wearing a burgundy colored full length gown that was covered with glittery jewels.

"Oh, shit!" G gasped when he saw the woman.

"What's wrong? Who's that?" Paul asked with concern.

'*The woman didn't look strange... comparatively.*'

'*She **did** seem to have an excessive amount of jewelry of all varieties, but... again... if you looked at the rest of the guests in attendance, she wasn't even a blip on the weird-o-meter.*'

"That's my mom."

"I hope you don't mind, but I let myself in." The woman said as she sauntered into the room. Truth be told, as tight as the dress appeared to be, her choices were probably to either elegantly saunter, or inelegantly shuffle.

"You're not welcome here, M. You know that." Grandpa J said as he stepped forward.

'*Wait. Hold it right there.*'

"Your mom's name is M? Seriously?" Paul asked incredulously.

"Shhh... watch." G said anxiously.

Grandpa J stepped forward, presumably to show her to the door.

"Get away from me, you... insect!" M spat with disgust, then popped open a paper fan that she'd been holding and fanned it once in his direction.

Paul couldn't believe his eyes when J was blown off his feet and thrown back nearly the length of the great hall.

At the same time, a rather... *abundant* woman stepped forward as did D's mother, Grandma B.

"It doesn't have to be like this, M. You can just leave." B tried to reason with her.

"*I can just leave.*" M repeated in a mocking tone, then angrily said, "Tried that. Didn't work. Thought I'd try something else."

M swished her fan in B's direction, but two little kids... or something... flew threw the air in the blink of an eye and got in the way.

Both of them were hit by a gust of wind and blown back. But B was unharmed, being shielded as she was whisked away by the woman wearing red with black polka dots.

Paul couldn't help but glance back at the two little girls, not only to see if they were hurt, but also to try and determine *what the hell* they were.

As both little girls impacted the far wall, Paul realized that they both had wings. Then, in an instant, they were perfectly normal looking, full grown women.

"What's going on here?" Paul asked disbelievingly.

"We're witches." G answered absently, focusing most of his attention on his mother.

"Come on! I thought you'd put up more of a fight than this! I brought something for all of you. And once every last one of you is dead and forgotten, then I can *finally* get on with my life." M said, drawing Paul's attention forward again.

A skirmish line, of sorts, had formed. Paul didn't know most of the people, and some had so drastically transformed that he couldn't make out who they were.

A black swarm gathered in the air behind M, and it looked for a moment like it might simply consume her. But instead, M waved her paper fan in that direction and the cloud of insects dispersed. A moment later, the robust woman wearing red with black polka dots lay sprawled on the floor.

"Aunt Zennie!" G gasped in horror.

"Rot! Wither! And Burn!" Grandma Gruit shrieked as she set fire to a little doll that she was holding.

"Oh, please!" M scoffed, then absently flicked her fan in Grandma Gruit's direction. In an instant, Grandma Gruit was flying across the room. Fortunately, for her at least, she landed on three other people.

A swarm of bats seemed to come from all directions at once. M was able to repel them, but not with as much ease as she'd been able to dispel the other attacks.

"That's better. What else have you got?" M asked with a maniacal grin.

Both of Toad's parents rushed at M from opposite directions. Toad's father, Horse, seemed to have increased his body mass by about half, and all of it was muscle. On M's other side, Kat had transformed into some sort of werecat creature that was primarily fangs and claws.

M took a step back and with one broad swipe of her fan, both attacks were immediately repelled.

"STOP!!!" A child's voice bellowed, then the unmistakable sound of... well... puke.

Paul turned in time to see Toad being rushed away by some of the adults. He looked a little different, like he had thicker, bumpier skin. But he appeared to be unharmed.

"You little monster!" M howled in disgust. Apparently, Toad had been able to projectile vomit on her from about twenty feet away.

"Why are you doing this, M? There's nothing left between us. There's no reason for this." D said as he stepped forward.

"You!" M screeched in rage, "You stole my life! And I'll get it back when you're dead!"

"Yeah. That makes sense." D said dubiously, then made a casual gesture toward the folding chairs. Immediately, about a dozen of the chairs seemed to come alive and

all of them started scampering toward M, almost like spiders, closing in on their prey.

"No. No. I can't have that." M said as she used her fan to blow the chairs away.

"M... Emmaline, listen to me. You need help. We can get you help." D said in a voice that was trying to sound calm and patient.

"I DON'T WANT YOUR HELP!!" M exploded in fury, then took out a small dagger and started making slashing movements in D's direction.

Cuts started appearing on his chest and forearms, although he was at least ten feet away.

"Don't hurt him!" Nazzy screamed as a transparent humanoid figure rose up through the stone floor, as though it had no substance. But as soon as the zombie's feet were above ground, it became fully solid and started moving toward M.

A strange sound drew Paul's attention and he saw Vinda reading from a small book. Chanting, actually. Even as she spoke the words, a misty form was coming into being before her.

"Looks like you've brought in some new blood." M said as she looked from Nazzy to Vinda. First she took hold of a talisman from around her neck and held it in the direction of the zombie. As soon as she did, the zombie dropped to the ground and stopped moving. Next, she took a ward off her belt, and waving it in Vinda's direction, dispelled the spirit before it was fully formed.

"Fortunately, I know what to do with blood." M said with a smile of self-satisfaction.

"Cheesy, Mom!" G said from Paul's side in a bored tone.

Paul turned to look at G and was shocked to see that G's face seemed to be painted, like a clown... a dangerous, nightmarish, clown.

"Oh, baby. Don't be mad at Mummy. I'll be done with this in just a minute, and then we'll be able to start our new life together."

"Um, no." G said, then made a grand lifting gesture with his hands.

As he did, flames started to rise up all around M.

"I should have known..." M said in a tone of long suffering as she took another amulet from around her neck, this one looking like a little crystal ball. She waved the little crystal dramatically as she said, "Clear from my sight that which is unreal." In the space of a heartbeat, all the flames had disappeared.

"Kids..." M said dramatically, then turned suddenly and thrust the dagger in G's direction, or she would have if two small demonic imps weren't biting into her arm and twisting, like dogs with a chew toy.

"Get off of me!" M screamed as she tried to swipe her fan at them. Although the fan did have some slight effect, it didn't convince them to stop what they were doing.

"Whoever's the summoner, she's vulnerable to demons! Summon more!" Great-great-Uncle Neese called out urgently.

"That's all I can do! I haven't summoned anything in fifteen years." Beth called in return.

"Mom?!" Paul asked in surprise.

"We'll talk later." Beth said as she kept her attention on M, who was slowly gaining the advantage over her imps.

"Demons! Of all the things..." M said in frustration as she finally got the second demon to release.

A barrage of ladybugs, animated chairs and a table, another zombie (perhaps the same zombie, hard to tell), and a ghostly wraith all moved in to attack M simultaneously.

"I don't think so!" M said as she used a broad swipe of her fan to clear all her attackers away in one move.

"Now, let's start with you." M said as she turned her attention toward Beth. "I can't have you summoning anymore demons, can I?"

"No." D said as he hurried to shield Beth with his own body.

"We won't let you hurt her." G said as he moved to his father's side.

"Fine." M said with a shrug. "I'll just kill you all, then."

In that moment, Paul saw the people he loved, gathered together, bravely facing their extermination.

Rage rose up from deep within him.

It was a rage filled with everything he always wanted but could never have.

That rage was brought forth, into physical being, as everything good in his life, everything worth living for, was now being threatened.

It was time for him to take *action*.

A howl from the depths of hell flowed out of his mouth as the earth started shaking and flames started rising from different points around the room.

"STOP HER!" A deep voice growled and Paul was surprised to find that it was his.

"Yes, master." Another voice responded, with sickening clarity.

Then a demonic entity rose up from a fiery pit that had appeared in the floor and grabbed M from behind.

Paul knew that the demon had been summoned by him and would follow his orders. Uncertain of what to do next, he turned to look at G with question.

When Paul tried to take a step, he realized that it wasn't that simple. It appeared that he would have to learn how to walk on hooves.

"What should I do with her?" Paul asked G uncertainly and was once again surprised by the deep gravelly tone of his own voice.

"Oh, baby. You know that mummy was only kidding, don't you? I would never ever hurt my iddle widdle baby." M told her son in baby talk.

"Go to hell." G said with disgust.

"You heard him." Paul said to his demon.

"Summoned, I come to serve. It will be as you say." The demon said reverently, then descended into the flaming pit he had emerged from, carrying M with him as she kicked and screamed, all the way down.

As soon as the demon was out of sight, the floor returned to it's normal appearance.

"Paul... Wow. I mean... Wow." G said in amazement.

"How do I stop... this?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Just put it back where you got it from. Remember what it was like coming out, and just put it right back in there." G said confidently.

Paul looked at his claw-like hands, then reached up and felt the horns on his head, trying to remember the feelings he had felt.

"How is this even possible? Even a witch, born with a natural talent for summoning, can't call up a demon on their first try. It takes *years* of practice." D said in amazement.

"Paul probably has the summoning talent because of me. It runs in my family." Beth said nervously.

"Even so..." D said with a shake of his head.

"Add to that... You see, Paul's father..." Beth said reluctantly.

"What about him? Who is he?" Paul asked firmly.

"I can't tell you his name. You might accidently summon him. Trust me, you REALLY don't want that." Beth implored him to understand.

"My father is a demon?" Paul asked in surprise.

"Yes. And that's why my family didn't want to have anything to do with me... *with us*. I'm a summoner who summoned, and became pregnant by, a demon." Beth said honestly.

"I can see why a family of summoners might have a problem with that." D said frankly.

"When I found out that I was pregnant, I made sure to banish him back to the demon realm before I lost my ability to do so." Beth continued to explain.

"Hey, I tell you what." D said as he put an arm around Beth and pulled her into a gentle hug.

"What?" She asked cautiously.

"I'm willing to overlook your ex if you're willing to overlook mine." D said hopefully.

Beth looked at D with surprise, then broke into a smile as she said, "We have a deal."

"So, you still wanna get married, then?" D asked hopefully.

"Absolutely." Beth said warmly.

* * * * *

It took a while for everyone to get things in order again.

Remarkably, no one was seriously injured.

There were a few bumps and bruises, but nothing that would impede the ceremony.

Several people made a point of telling Toad what a brave and wonderful thing he had done. That's when Toad's parents revealed that Toad's vomit attack on M was toxic and would have disabled her, if it had had enough time for the neurotoxin to take effect.

* * * * *

As the music played, Paul walked his mother up the aisle, in his bare feet and what was left of his shredded suit.

After he presented his mother to her intended, he stepped back and looked past D to find G looking back at him.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to join this couple in matrimony. Do you, Elizabeth Hiller, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?" Uncle Neese asked solemnly.

"I do."

"Do you, Aloysius Darroch take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do."

"I now pronounce you man and wife." Uncle Neese said happily.

A cheer rose up from all assembled as the couple kissed.

* * * * *

"Aloysius? How did he get 'D' from Aloysius?" Paul asked G quietly.

"I kept the 'G' in my name because that's all that was worth saving." G said in a leading tone.

"Okay, I get it. If nothing's usable in the first name, you skip to the last." Paul said with a chuckle.

"Yep." G said with a grin, then rhetorically asked, "Half-demon, huh?"

"Yeah. It looks that way." Paul said frankly.

"I guess that's the end of me being the Alpha." G said regretfully.

"No. You'll always be my Alpha." Paul said firmly.

"Always?"

"Forever." Paul said with certainty, then sealed it with a kiss.

And They All Lived Happily Ever After

Parvenu 2: All Hallows' Eve

© 2016 by MultiMapper
All Rights Reserved

"Well, even though we went through a rough patch, everything seems to have turned out alright." D said as he approached the boys with Beth at his side.

'*A rough patch? I'd hate to see what he considers full-on chaos!*'

"All's well that ends well." G cheerfully supplied.

"But that's the best part. This is only the beginning." D said warmly as he cuddled Beth to his side.

"Are you alright, Paul?" Beth asked gently.

'*Am I alright about finding out that my biological father is **literally** a demon?*'

'*Am I alright about watching everyone I love almost get killed?*'

'*Am I alright about finding out that everything that I always believed to be true turned out to be lies?*'

"I'll have to get back to you on that." Paul slowly answered.

"By the way, have you had enough time to think about adoption? Yes? No? Maybe?" D asked curiously. His seemingly casual tone was in stark contrast to the seriousness of his question.

Paul couldn't help but smile at D's directness and quietly answered, "Yes."

"Good." D said with satisfaction, then a curious look came over his face before he hesitantly asked, "Was that 'yes', that you've had enough time? Or 'yes', that you want to be adopted?"

Paul laughed aloud at the question, then said, "Both. And before you ask, the answer to your next question is also, 'yes'. I *do* want to have my name changed."

"Good. I'm glad." D said sincerely, then quietly added, "I'll get to work on that as soon as we get back to the States."

"Okay." Paul agreed as G put an arm around him and hugged him tightly.

"Right answer?" Paul asked with a smile.

"Very right." G assured him as he continued to unabashedly hold him.

* * * * *

Once D and Beth had moved on to talk to some of their wedding guests, Nazzy and Vinda approached as one and Nazzy immediately asked, "A demon, huh?"

"Is that a problem?" Paul asked cautiously.

"A problem?! That's the most awesome-cool thing EVER!" Nazzy nearly yelled.

Paul looked at G uncertainly.

"Demons have fanboys. Don't ask me why." G said simply.

"Are *you* a demon fanboy?" Paul asked with a grin.

"I never was before, but I'm beginning to understand the appeal." G said warmly.

"I just think it's wonderful that you're one of us! I don't like having to be careful about what I can and can't talk about." Vinda said frankly.

"I'm just glad that you decided to be my friends anyway, even when you thought I was... normal." Paul finished quietly.

"Well, of course we were! If G likes you, then we kinda have to like you, too." Nazzy said frankly.

"We'd at least have to try." Vinda agreed, then quickly added, "But I guess it's just good for us that G wouldn't like someone who was a jerk."

"So, from the look of it, you *just* found out about witches when G's mom showed up and the magic started flying around." Nazzy said speculatively.

"Yeah. I had a feeling that something was off... but I probably could have explained that away as having to do with being in a fourteenth century castle on Halloween." Paul said frankly.

"Where is everybody going?" Vinda asked suddenly as she looked around curiously.

"The reception! We're missing the food!" Nazzy yelped.

Paul and G shared a smile at his reaction.

As Nazzy and Vinda hurried away, G put a hand on Paul's arm to hold him back and quietly asked, "Are you really alright?"

"There's a lot that I don't understand and I'm a little bit scared of what I'm going to find out. But as long as I've got you and my mom and your dad... I think that I'll be okay." Paul said honestly.

"Good. We'd better hurry up and get in there before Nazzy hogs all the eye of newt." G said with a grin.

"You're kidding? Aren't you?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Probably."

* * * * *

There was no doubt that the meal was a celebration. The center of the table was heaped with every kind of food imaginable... and then some.

Everyone in attendance was chattering amiably with everyone else while they ate.

Paul was a little bit overwhelmed by it, seeing as he'd never been around ANY family before. But he was also grateful that none of the family were making a big deal over his transformation earlier.

'*I'm a demon... well, a half-demon.*'

'*I don't even know how to **be** a half-demon. What do they do?*'

"When we're done eating, how about we find someplace private where we can do some magic?" Nazzy suggested hopefully.

"Paul and I did some exploring, yesterday. It looks like there are lots of good places that we can go where no one will bother us." G assured him.

"Just make sure there's lot's of room. My zombies need room to move around." Nazzy reminded him.

"This place has, like, a thousand rooms. We'll find a good one."

'*They all seem so casual about it. I guess it wouldn't hurt if I asked them some questions.*'

"Can each of you do only one kind of magic, or is there magic that works for everyone?" Paul asked curiously.

"Vinda? This is more your thing than ours." G said frankly.

"Yeah. Let Vinda explain it, she understands it best." Nazzy confirmed between bites of food.

"It's not that hard." Vinda said with a roll of her eyes, then looked at Paul and explained, "It comes down to your power, your natural ability and your control. There are spells that call for more power than I have, so when I try them, they fail. There are spells that are too different from my natural ability, so those usually fail, too. And the worst is when you cast a spell that *doesn't* fail, but you aren't strong enough to control it. Then just about anything can happen."

G nodded, then said, "Some people's primary ability is transformation, so their magic really only works on them."

"Well, some of them can do 'basic magic', but they're usually pretty weak at it." Vinda gently added.

"What's 'basic magic'?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Alignments, tangentials, lagoriths..." G said in a bored tone before noticing the 'totally lost' expression that Paul was wearing.

"The 'basic magic' is a collection of simple spells that most witches can do. They're nothing flashy, but they can make life easier." Nazzy said simply.

"Right. But the more complex the spell, the more likely it is that you won't be able to cast it, unless it falls into your specialty." Vinda said seriously.

"Try thinking of it like a tree. You're on a branch, I'm on a branch, Nazzy and Vinda are each on a branch. The trunk is where the basic spells are, that most witches can use. Nazzy and Vinda's branches are both close together, since they're both summoners. But their specialties are different enough that they can't use each other's spells... You haven't crossed over yet, have you?" G asked curiously.

"Not yet. Maybe when we get stronger." Nazzy confirmed, then thoughtfully added, "Once he gets some training, Paul might be able to use some of our spells, too, since his ability seems to be rooted in summoning."

"I don't know if 'demon summoning' works differently or how far removed it is. I've never even met a demon summoner before." G said frankly.

"Are they rare?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I don't know. They could be. I just know that we don't have any in our family." G said frankly.

"Until now." Nazzy added with a smile.

"And I guess you should know that 'demon summoners' have kind of a bad reputation among some groups of witches." Vinda reluctantly said.

'*That doesn't sound good.*'

"Not that *we're* like that!" Nazzy quickly interrupted.

"Right." G confirmed, then playfully added, "Some of my best friends are 'demon summoners'."

Paul smiled at the declaration.

"It's not like they're hated or hunted or anything like that. Some people just look at their type of magic as being a little 'blacker' than they're comfortable with." Vinda said seriously.

"So, they think that we're evil?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Mostly." Nazzy said with a casual shrug, then quickly added, "But not everyone thinks that way. Some of us really respect that you have such a cool and powerful ability."

"Fanboy." G said to Nazzy with a smirk.

"I think that the people who disapprove see your specialty of magic as being evil. Not you." Vinda patiently corrected.

"Big difference." Nazzy huffed.

"Nazzy, you summon *zombies*. Some of the 'Rainbows and Unicorns' crowd look down on you just as much as they look down on demon summoners." Vinda said frankly.

There was a long moment of silence, then G quietly said, "Try not to worry about it too much. Most witches today know that the power you're born with is the luck of the draw. It's really only the hoity-toity bunch who pay any attention to that."

"Yeah. Since they're born with sparkly fluffy bunny magic, they think that they're better than everyone else." Nazzy said wearily.

"Are there a lot of witches like that?" Paul asked with concern.

"I don't know. We tend to travel in different circles. Let's just say that I know that there are *some* of them around." G said frankly.

"From what I saw during the fight, I don't think we have any fluffy bunnies here." Nazzy said frankly.

G laughed, then said, "No. The closest we have to that are my cousins Grace and Wanda and during the fight, they were out there, defending Grandma B."

"Which ones were they?" Paul asked cautiously as he tried to remember the details of the battle.

"In their fairy forms, they look like little girls with wings." G said simply.

"I remember them! That was brave of them to jump out in front of that attack." Paul said seriously.

"Yeah." G agreed, then continued, "Most of us are stronger and more resistant to damage in our transformed states... well, except for me."

"I don't know how strong you are, but you sure do look awesome." Paul assured him.

G seemed to consider for a moment, then smiled and said, "I guess that's almost as good."

'*I won't let anyone hurt you.*'

Before their conversation could continue, the sound of a spoon clinking against the side of a glass drew everyone's attention.

Paul turned to see D standing with Beth at his side.

"I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of you for sharing in our wedding. The preliminary excitement notwithstanding, all of you helped to make this day special for us as well as making it one of the more 'memorable' weddings in recent history." D said warmly.

A few chuckles floated around the table at D's playful words.

"To add to the joy of this day, my new wife's son has accepted my offer to adopt him and has also chosen to accept our family name. Everyone, please join me in welcoming Paul Darroch into the family." D said in a booming voice.

A round of applause rose up and a few of the more vocal members of the family let out 'woops' of joy.

'*Maybe **not** being part of a family wasn't so bad.*'

'*At least it was quieter... and I didn't have a room full of people looking at me.*'

Paul could feel his face reddening and had to fight the urge to crawl under the table.

Unexpectedly, G reached over and put an arm around Paul, then gave him a firm kiss on the cheek.

As much as Paul wanted to hide before, *now* the only thing that he wanted was to simply cease to exist.

"Starting a new family and a new life can be a challenge. Knowing that all of you are supporting us will help to carry us through the hills and valleys that are to come. Thank you, all of you, for standing with us." D said sincerely.

'*Okay. I guess when he puts it like that, maybe having a family isn't **so** bad.*'

Paul watched as D and Beth walked, arm in arm, away from their place at the table and out the door.

As Paul noticed various people around the table getting up from their chairs, G quietly said, "Let's go."

"Where to next?" Paul asked curiously.

"Let's go find a place to do some magic." G answered simply.

"I need to go back to our room and get some more shoes. My other ones didn't survive the wedding." Paul said quietly.

"Sounds like a plan. You ready?" G asked with a smile.

Paul looked around and saw that Nazzy and Vinda were expectantly waiting for his agreement.

Just as he was about to answer, Paul's attention was drawn by two people approaching.

"Welcome to the family, Paul. We're so glad to be having you." Kat said warmly.

"Thank you." Paul shyly responded.

"If this family function proceeds like most, we're probably going to be gathering into groups and catching each other up on what's been going on with our individual families and reminiscing about days gone by." Horst added.

Paul was rather proud of himself for not visibly cringing at the declaration.

"I'm having the feeling that, at a time like this, Tadhg might enjoy your company more than ours. Would you be minding if he joined you for a bit?" Kat asked hopefully.

Paul was confused for a moment, but then saw Toad peek one eye from behind his father's left side.

"We were planning to go to one of the unused rooms and practice our magic. Is that going to be a problem?" G asked cautiously.

"No. Not at all. Tadhg has just started learning his spellcasting. Although he's made respectable progress with his natural ability, I think it might be good for him to witness others who have progressed to the next level. It will show him what he will someday be able to achieve." Horst said thoughtfully.

"If Toad wants to go with us, we'll be happy to have him." G said easily.

"Thank you, G. I'm hoping all of you will be having a wonderful evening." Kat said warmly.

"Enjoy your walk down memory lane." G said with a slight smirk.

Horst squatted down to look his son in the eyes and quietly said, "Your mother and I will be in the sitting room, right over there, if you need us."

Toad slowly closed, then opened his eyes.

"Good. Have fun." Horst said before engulfing his son in a firm hug.

'*Yeah. That's what a dad should be.*'

* * * * *

"Do you know where we're going?" Paul asked cautiously, enjoying the feeling of wearing shoes again.

Despite their previous explorations, Paul found that he didn't recognize the wing of the building that they were entering.

"No. But I think that we're far enough away from the great hall that we probably won't run into anyone else. We should be able to use any of these rooms." G said as he continued walking.

That being said, Nazzy walked to the nearest door and cautiously opened it.

After a moment, Vinda hesitantly asked, "What is it?"

"Dark." Nazzy said frankly.

Vinda rolled her eyes, then patiently asked, "Why don't you turn on the light?"

"That's what I'm trying to do. I just can't find the light switch." Nazzy said as he continued to feel along the wall inside the door.

"They probably don't have electricity in this part of the castle yet." G quietly offered.

"Oh. I didn't think of that." Vinda said with surprise.

"If we have to go to a part of the castle that has electricity, then we're probably going to be close to other people and get interrupted." Nazzy said cautiously.

Paul's eyes were drawn by a movement. He watched as Toad walked past Nazzy, into the dark room, all by himself.

A few seconds later, there was a flash, then a warm glowing light shining out through the doorway.

"Or we could just use magic." G said with a grin.

"I should have thought of that." Nazzy grumbled before walking into the room.

* * * * *

"Good work, Toad. Thanks." G said appreciatively as he walked into the large empty room. Paul noticed that the room was as bright as though it were being lit by the noonday sun, but at the same time, there wasn't a light *source* anywhere in evidence.

"What do you think this room was used for?" Vinda asked curiously as she looked around.

"I don't have a clue. In fact, I don't think that I've ever been in here before." G said honestly.

"Do you think it'll be alright if we do our magic in here?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"Yeah. As long as we don't make a mess, I don't think anyone will care." G said speculatively.

"Do you want to go first?" Nazzy asked G cautiously.

"No, you go ahead. Once you've got your zombies up and running, I can do my thing." G assured him.

"Thanks." Nazzy said appreciatively.

Paul watched curiously as Nazzy seemed to freeze in place.

The transformation wasn't as dramatic as some that Paul had witnessed earlier, but now that he was paying attention, he could see the color drain out of Nazzy's skin until it became an unnatural looking pasty white, with blue veins beginning to show through.

The next thing Paul noticed was the color fading from Nazzy's brown eyes. The brown turned first to hazel, then to blue. The color became lighter and lighter until it was such a pale blue that it was nearly white.

When Nazzy reached out his arms, Paul reflexively took a step back.

"Don't worry. Nazzy's got good control. You won't get hurt." G quietly assured him.

Before Paul could think of what to say in response, he saw a glowing figure start to emerge from the floor in front of Nazzy.

Paul could see Nazzy straining as he slowly lifted his arms, trying to pull the man-shaped figure up through the stone floor with the force of his will.

Just as had happened in the great hall, during the battle, as soon as the transparent glowing figure was completely above ground, it stopped glowing and became fully solid.

"Nice! You're getting a lot better at that." G said in an impressed voice.

Nazzy wilted with relief as he let out a slow gust of breath.

"By the way, where do you get the zombies from? Is this one of my relatives?" G asked curiously.

"I really don't know. I just do the summoning and I guess whatever 'remains' are closest answer my call." Nazzy said thoughtfully.

Paul blinked in surprise as he realized that what Nazzy was doing might easily be thought of as 'desecration'.

"But this isn't 'resurrection', it's 'reanimation'. Even if this *is* one of your ancestors, I'm not messing with their soul or disturbing their rest. This is just the meat." Nazzy said frankly.

'*Thanks for the clarification, Nazzy.*'

'*Remind me not to bury anyone that I care about anywhere near you.*'

"So, Paul, what do you think? Pretty cool, huh?" G asked with a smile.

Paul didn't want to lie, but in this instance he also didn't want to tell the whole truth. So, instead, he formulated a question to hopefully divert the conversation.

"Will the zombie do whatever you say?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah, mostly. But I can only give it one or two word instructions. If I try to do much more than that, it usually just stops and won't do anything." Nazzy said frankly.

"How hard is it to send it back?" Paul asked curiously.

Nazzy smiled, then made a quick gesture with his hand.

The zombie immediately became transparent and sank through the floor.

"Did it go back to where you got it from? I mean, like, back to its grave?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah... maybe... possibly... actually, I have no idea." Nazzy finally admitted.

'*That doesn't make me feel a whole lot better.*'

"Vinda, do you want to go next?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. I can do a little one, just to show Paul what it is that I do." Vinda said easily as she took a small book out of her back pocket.

"I'm going to summon another zombie while she's doing that." Nazzy said quietly, careful not to disturb Vinda as she began chanting.

G nodded either his agreement or his acknowledgement.

Paul watched Vinda carefully, to see if he could detect any type of transformation as she read aloud.

Although he didn't see any change in her appearance, her voice seemed to have gained an 'echoing' quality and no matter how closely Paul tried to listen, he couldn't seem to make out the words that Vinda was saying. He was certain that she was speaking in some language that he wasn't familiar with, but what he was hearing was different. Her words were somehow muffled or slurred to the point that he couldn't distinguish an identifiable sequence of sounds.

Paul lost track of time as he continued to watch.

Even though he had been looking at her the entire time that she had been reading aloud, he hadn't noticed the formation of a slight aura of light surrounding her. When he finally realized that it was there, he wasn't completely sure if he were really seeing it or not. It was the sort of thing that seemed like it might disappear if he blinked his eyes.

A wisp of smoke began to rise into the air.

As Vinda finally stopped reading, she smiled at the five or six inch ribbon of smoke right in front of her.

"What is it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"A ghost." Vinda said proudly.

"Of a person?" Paul asked uneasily.

"Probably, yeah." Vinda said simply.

"The ghost of who?" Paul asked, although he wasn't sure that he really wanted to know.

"I don't know. I can't communicate with the little ones, like this. But if I call up a bigger one, I can ask them for their name." Vinda said seriously.

"Is this another one of G's relatives?" Paul asked nervously.

'*I guess I can see why she's Nazzy's girlfriend.*'

"I don't know... maybe." Vinda reluctantly admitted, then tried to explain, "I use the spell to summon the type of spirit that I want, to come and do my bidding."

"What would you ask it to do?" Paul asked quietly.

"A little one like this? Not much. I could get it to knock on a window or ring a bell. It *might* be strong enough to blow out a candle, but that would be pushing it." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"What good would that do in a fight, like at the wedding?" Paul asked curiously.

"Oh, that! No, I wouldn't summon a ghost like this for battle." Vinda said quickly, then explained, "At the wedding, I was trying to summon a wraith. They're a type of spirit that's good at fighting."

"I don't know anything about wraiths. Is that a kind of ghost, too?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yes. It's just like a regular ghost, but angrier. I use my summons to focus on their anger to bring them here, then I tell them who to attack." Vinda said seriously.

"What are you going to do with this one?" Paul asked quietly as he looked at the little ribbon of smoke slowly twisting in front of her.

"I'm going to send it back to where it came from. I just called it up because this spell is a fairly easy one and I wanted to show you my ability." Vinda said, then made a gesture with her hand as she muttered a simple phrase at the ghost before her.

As soon as the words were spoken, the little bluish-white twist of smoke dispersed into nothing.

'*That was...*'

'*...sad?*'

'*...disrespectful?*'

'*...unforgivable?*'

'*Or maybe I should just start thinking of this as the new normal.*'

Paul looked toward G and noticed that he was looking down at Toad.

"Do you want to show Paul your ability, too?" G asked gently.

A slight smile crossed Toad's lips, then he slowly closed, and then opened his eyes.

"Just don't poison anyone." G warned him.

Toad sat down on the floor, then started taking off his shoes and socks.

Paul looked at G with question to receive a shrug in response.

It took a moment before Toad was ready, but when he finally stood, he looked at Paul with a shy smile.

Paul smiled in return.

In a flash of movement, almost too fast for Paul to see, Toad was across the room, in a crouched position.

"How'd he do that?" Paul asked without thinking.

"You'd have to ask him." G said with an impish grin.

Paul watched Toad carefully, then blinked when Toad seemed to have vanished.

"Up there." G said as he pointed upward.

Paul followed G's pointing finger and was surprised to find Toad hanging from one of the rafters, nearly fifteen feet overhead. His webbed toes appeared to be almost like fingers, holding on to the beam.

He couldn't help but notice that Toad's appearance had changed. Toad was still recognizable as being himself, but his skin appeared to be slightly darker and... honestly... just what one might think of as being appropriate for a toad.

In one fluid move, Toad dropped from the rafter to land in a crouch, right in front of Paul and G.

"Nice moves!" G said appreciatively.

"Yeah! That was great!" Paul said sincerely.

Toad looked up at them, then slowly closed his eyes, then just as slowly, reopened them.

* * * * *

"Paul, do you want to go next?" G asked hopefully.

"I don't know how to make it work... or if I even can." Paul said honestly.

"From what we saw you do at the wedding, it looks like you can bring them up, but the big question is, are you going to be able to put them back?" Nazzy said seriously.

G nodded his agreement, then added, "But even if you don't summon anything, you can at least try out your magical form."

"My what?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Your magical form. Right now, since you're new at it, you'll probably have to transform to do any magic at all. But once you learn how to control it, you *might* be able to do magic in your human form, too..."

"I'm not human?" Paul asked with surprise.

"No. You're a witch." Nazzy said simply.

"A half-witch, actually." G gently corrected.

"Right. But as far as I know, it should work about the same." Nazzy said consideringly.

G shrugged, then turned to Paul and said, "From what I've heard, there used to be a lot of different kinds of witches, and a lot of them didn't look human at all. But thanks to natural selection, I guess it worked out that only the most human looking witches were able to make it to the twenty-first century. I've heard stories about a lost tribe, hiding out and remaining separate from the human world. But the only witches that I've ever *met* can pass for human."

"We look like them as a natural defense, so that they can't easily identify us and hunt us down." Nazzy added.

After a moment to consider, Paul quietly asked, "How do I make it work?"

"You know, after the fight, when I told you how to put it back? Now you just do the reverse and pull it back out." G said instructively.

"Remember, there's a lady present." Nazzy said with a grin.

Vinda glanced in his direction, but since she was in the middle of chanting another spell, she didn't verbally respond.

"Go ahead, Paul. You can do it." G said encouragingly.

"Hold on." Paul said as he sat down and started to take off his shoes.

"Good idea." G said with a grin.

"Toad taught me that." Paul said with a smile and a wink at the younger boy.

* * * * *

Once Paul had his shoes and socks off, and was back to standing, he cast his mind back to the rage and determination he felt when he saw his loved ones being threatened. He remembered the physical sensations as the horns broke through the skin of his temples.

This time, he was able to feel the creeping sensation as the different parts of his body began to transform.

"Whoah!" Paul suddenly yelped as he had to fight for balance.

G and Nazzy immediately hurried to steady him on his hooves.

"You got it?" G asked cautiously as he continued to hold Paul's arm.

"Yeah. The whole 'standing' thing is a lot more difficult when you don't have toes." Paul tried to explain, then realized that his voice had dropped about three octaves.

"Looking good." G said with a smile as he stepped back.

"You must be about six and a half feet tall." Nazzy interjected.

Paul looked around and realized that Nazzy was right. He was significantly taller than he had been in his 'human' form.

"What do I do now?" Paul asked cautiously, still surprised by the sound of his own voice.

"Just hold it there for a while. Maybe walk around a little bit and get used to your new body." G said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. And while you're doing that, I'll pull up another zombie." Nazzy said as his skin started to go pale.

Paul glanced at Toad, who was looking very toad-like in his transformed state, then looked at G inquiringly.

"Yeah. Here it goes." G said quietly.

G's coloring began to change, becoming something similar to the face paint on a clown. Paul noticed that his dark hair seemed to become even darker, and was becoming longer and more 'shaggy'.

The 'painted' smile that covered a large share of his face could be classified as nothing other than a smirk. All of G's facial features were 'painted on' and grossly exaggerated. The overall effect was demented and disturbing... and slightly erotic. Paul found that he couldn't look away.

'*Spectacular!*'

"My primary ability is illusion. But if the person I use it on doesn't know that, then it can become real to them." G said frankly.

"Huh?" Paul asked in confusion.

"One of my best things is fire. If you don't know that the fire is an illusion, then your body will react to it as if it were real. You'll get an actual burn from it." G explained.

"Oh." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Let's see what I can do..." G trailed off as he slowly looked around the room.

Paul watched G carefully, still unable to tear his gaze away.

Once G had decided what he was going to do, he seemed to brace himself for an incredible effort, then started to slowly raise his hands, much as Nazzy had done when summoning his zombie.

Suddenly, all around the room, portions of the floor seemed to fall away and flames began to emerge. One by one, the gray stone walls were covered with red velvet tapestries with ornate gold patterns embroidered on them.

Paul turned and was surprised to find that the room, which had been completely empty a moment before, was now furnished with luxurious furnishings. Admittedly, most of them were red and gold, but there was no hint that they were less than fully real.

"That's about it." G said quietly as he lowered his hands.

"That's amazing." Paul said honestly.

G smiled at the praise, then explained, "You can't sit on the chairs or feel the heat from the fire yet. From what Dad says, I'll probably be able to make my illusions more real as I get older and more powerful."

"So, does that mean that eventually you'll be able to create anything that you can imagine?" Paul asked in wonder.

"Not exactly. Nothing that I create is permanent. It all fades away. So even if I'm able to make 'real' things someday, they'll only last for a little while." G said regretfully.

"But can you make something like a sword?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah. With something simple like that, I can even make it feel like it has weight and substance."

As proof, G held out his hand and a moment later a sword appeared in it.

"And if you used it on someone, would you hurt them with it?" Paul asked slowly.

"If they didn't know it was an illusion, yeah. Probably." G said simply, then admitted, "I've never actually *tried* stabbing anyone."

"What about a gun?" Paul asked thoughtfully.

G glanced at the sword in his hand and it immediately became a gun. "But I haven't figured out how to do the chemical reaction of the gunpowder to make it fire."

"What about something like a laser gun?" Paul asked curiously.

"I don't know. I never tried." G said honestly, then the gun in his hand transformed slightly into a futuristic looking pistol style weapon.

G pointed it toward the wall and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

"Maybe if I understood more about lasers I could make one that would work. But if the person who I was firing it at knew that it was an illusion, then it probably wouldn't matter because then they'd know that it couldn't really hurt them." G said regretfully.

"But if you can make the things you imagine become real, then maybe your laser would really be able to cause damage." Paul said reasonably.

"I don't know... Maybe."

"Hey, G. Let's do a swordfight." Nazzy said excitedly as he held out his hand.

G smiled and his laser transformed into a sword as another sword appeared in Nazzy's outstretched hand. It was obvious to Paul that this *wasn't* their first swordfight.

Paul carefully began to back away, then noticed Toad looking up at him.

"Do you want to come up here where you can get a better view of the battle?" Paul asked with a grin.

Toad seemed to disappear in a flash, then Paul felt a slight weight land on his shoulders.

As Paul and Toad watched, Nazzy and G began fighting each other very dramatically.

Although the sensation was foreign to him, Paul was fairly certain that Toad was holding onto his horns as he was standing on his shoulders.

'*Real or not, this is amazing.*'

Paul supposed that the stakes weren't quite as high as they appeared to be, since both of them knew that the swords were illusions and that they couldn't really get hurt by them.

Even so, the sparks and clanging sounds when the swords clashed were spectacular and the fight was exciting to watch.

A movement on the other side of the room drew Paul's attention and he saw a zombie slowly walking, in search of some unknown thing.

Paul then glanced to the other side of the room, where Vinda was still sitting cross-legged, reading aloud from her small book.

She had already been reading far longer than she had when summoning 'the wisp', and Paul wondered what she was trying to bring forth this time.

* * * * *

The sword fight had gone on for nearly ten minutes, but eventually both G and Nazzy were tired of the fight and agreed to call it a draw.

As G joined Paul and Toad at the side of the room, Paul quietly asked, "Is this what it's like? Is this how we live our lives?"

"This is us playing and showing off for each other. I think I know what's bothering you." G said as he looked up at Paul, then farther up at Toad, who was still on Paul's shoulders.

"What's that?" Paul asked cautiously, not entirely sure that he wanted to know.

"*What* you are might have changed, but *who* you are hasn't. You're still you and your life is still what it was before. Now it's just this, too." G said assuringly.

'*What?*'

'Is Meredith Baxter Birney about to come out here and try to convince us to have a dialog and explore our inner conflicts?'

'*Oh, well. He's cute and he cares and he really means it.*'

'*I can think of worse things.*'

"Hey! Paul! What do you think of this?" Nazzy called out from across the room.

Making sure to turn his whole body, so that Toad could see, too, Paul looked and smiled at Nazzy and the three zombies that he had walking in a tight formation.

When Nazzy saw that he had their attention, he bellowed, "Behold! My army of the undead!"

"An army of three?" G asked with a smile.

"It's one more than I could do two months ago." Nazzy said in his defense as he left his 'army' and crossed the room to join the others.

"I guess so." G chuckled.

'*No matter how you look at it, that's pretty cool.*'

'*I wonder what I could do.*'

"Do you think I should try to summon a demon?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. I think that you should talk to your mom before you try something like that. You might be able to pull them up, but putting them back is a whole other story." G said frankly.

"Yeah. And if one of my zombies gets loose, it's probably not going to cause too much trouble. Demons... yeah, let's not do that." Nazzy said frankly.

'*Right.*'

'*Releasing hell on earth is a **bad** thing.*'

'*Got it.*'

"I did it!" Vinda exclaimed happily.

Everyone turned and saw Vinda, still sitting cross-legged on the floor, with a fully formed, six foot tall ghostly apparition floating right in front of her.

"Wow!" Nazzy said in amazement.

"Way to go!" G said appreciatively.

"What is your name?" Vinda asked the spirit before her in a strong, firm voice.

There was a long silent moment as everyone waited for the answer.

"Who are you?" Vinda asked, sounding to be quite a bit less sure of herself.

Again, they waited.

"Um... hold on. This isn't right." Vinda said nervously.

"What's wrong?" Nazzy asked with immediate concern.

Vinda muttered a quick phrase, then waited for a reaction.

Nothing happened.

She raised her hand, then made a quick swiping gesture.

Still, nothing happened.

"What is it?" G asked cautiously.

"Oh, crap!" Vinda said anxiously, then picked up her book and started flipping pages.

"What's up, Vin?" Nazzy asked as he hurried to her side, being careful not to step through the ghost that was hovering in front of her.

"He won't answer me... and he won't go back." Vinda said as she found the page that she was looking for.

"What should we do?" Nazzy asked quietly.

"Don't worry. I've got this." Vinda said firmly, then began to read from her book.

As she was reading, the ghost slowly turned, then began to float across the room.

"Vin?" Nazzy asked anxiously.

Vinda glanced up from her book with an expression of frustration, then went back to reading at an increased pace.

"Whatever you're doing, it looks like your ghost isn't going to wait around for you to do it." G said reluctantly.

Finally, Vinda stopped reading and quickly stood as she said, "I should have realized that it's Halloween. It's the best night of the year for summoning spirits, but it's also one of the **worst** for sending them back."

"What should we do?" Nazzy asked helplessly.

"Follow him! Don't let him get away!" Vinda said as she hurried across the room.

"Come on!" G said to Paul and Toad.

"Go on ahead. We need a minute to put our shoes back on. We'll catch up to you." Paul said as he fought to return to his 'human' form.

With one quick jump, Toad was crouched beside him, and a moment later he was hurrying to pull his socks on, right beside Paul.

* * * * *

Paul and Toad hurried out of the room and into the hallway.

They stopped, frozen in their tracks, looking for anything that would indicate where the others might have gone.

Suddenly, the scuffing of footsteps sounded and Paul fought to determine where the sound had come from.

Toad took firm hold of Paul's hand and began to urgently pull.

Since Paul didn't have any reason to favor one direction over another, he let Toad guide him.

* * * * *

They hurried down one corridor, then another.

Paul was sure that they were lost, but still had no reason to question or discourage Toad.

One thing he *did* absently notice in the rush was that although the lighting in the hallway was much dimmer than that of the room they had been in, he still couldn't find a source for it.

'*Even though it isn't obvious, there's magic going on all over this place.*'

'*And unless I'm severely mistaken, the inside of this castle is a lot bigger than the outside.*'

'*What have I gotten myself into?*'

As they came to an intersection of hallways, Toad suddenly stopped and was obviously listening for another clue.

Paul strained to hear anything and finally just barely heard what sounded like a footstep in the distance.

As soon as he heard the sound, Toad was urgently pulling on his hand again, guiding him away.

* * * * *

As Paul and Toad turned a corner, they just barely caught a glimpse of G and Nazzy walking into a room.

Paul and Toad hurried to follow.

It took a moment for them to arrive at the doorway, but when they did, they stepped into a furnished room that looked like an old, forgotten library.

"I didn't know if you guys would be able to find us." G said with a relieved smile.

"Toad must be part bloodhound. I didn't have any idea of which way to go, but he stayed right on your trail." Paul said with a proud smile at the younger boy at his side.

"I think we've got it cornered!" Nazzy called out from a doorway at the side of the room.

"Good. Just let us know if there's something that we can do." G called in return, then turned his attention back to Paul and said, "Paul, I don't know if you've been introduced. This is my Cousin Teek."

The older teenage boy was sitting in one of the chairs reading a book, and Paul wasn't sure if the boy hadn't been there a moment before or if he just hadn't noticed him.

"My first name is Lennox, you can call me Lenn." The boy said in a low voice with a pronounced Scottish accent.

"It's nice to meet you, Lenn." Paul said as he recalled G's earlier warning, which implied that 'Cousin Teek' was known to be something of a thief.

"I saw you at the wedding. Not many people our age are as strong in their magic as you are. That was impressive." Lenn said with a surprising lack of emotion behind

his words.

Paul didn't get the sense that Lenn was being insincere, but more that the boy wasn't comfortable expressing emotions.

"Thanks." Paul said gratefully.

"Shit!" Nazzy yelped from the next room.

"That doesn't sound good." G said as he glanced toward the door, then turned back toward Lenn and said, "Vinda let out a ghost and she's having trouble putting it back. Do you want to help us catch it?"

"Really?!" Lenn asked with surprise.

In the minute or two of being in Lenn's company, Paul got the sense that seeing Lenn express a true emotion was probably a rare thing.

"Yeah." G confirmed, then cautiously asked, "Are you alright?"

"Not really. My parents have been having problems for a while, now. When we were packing to come here, my dad said that he wasn't going to come with us. And then he said that when me and my mom get back, he'll be gone." Lenn said quietly.

"Okay. That sucks." G said simply.

Paul couldn't help but smile at G's forthright manner.

'*G wears his emotions out in the open, for all to see.*'

'*He doesn't hold anything back.*'

'*That's part of why I love him.*'

'*Yeah. That's right. I love him.*'

"Stop it!" Nazzy yelled, just as the bluish-white ghost emerged from the side room and moved in a direct line for the door to the hallway.

"How?" G called as he hurried toward the door.

"I don't know. Get in it's way or something." Nazzy said as he met up with G.

Vinda ran out of the side room, obviously having trouble trying to read aloud while walking at the same time.

"Maybe ghost chasing will help to take your mind off of things. Do you want to?" Paul asked as he felt Toad pulling on his hand.

"Yeah." Lenn said as he started to stand.

"Come on."

* * * * *

Although Paul, Toad and Lenn started out a few seconds behind, they were easily able to catch up to G, Nazzy and Vinda, who were rushing down the hallway.

"Crap! It got away!" G called out in frustration.

"It's got to be in one of these three rooms." Nazzy said reasonably, then decisively added, "Vinda and I will take this one."

G looked around the rest of their group and seemed to be uncertain.

"Toad and I have been a good team so far. We'll take the second room." Paul said simply, then guided Toad to walk with him, not waiting for G to agree.

"It looks like it's you and me, Teek... I mean, Lenn. Come on." G said as he started toward the third door.

* * * * *

As Paul and Toad walked into the room that Paul had chosen, they noticed not only that it seemed to be another library, but also that it was currently occupied.

"Sorry. We were just..." Paul began to say, but was interrupted.

"Come in and join us. We're just plotting and scheming for tonight." A comparatively young woman said pleasantly.

"We really can't stay..." Paul began to say.

"You're Paul, D's new son, aren't you? I'm Isobel, this is my brother, Gilles. Here's my mom and dad, Grace and Rhiseart and my Aunt Wanda." The young woman said pleasantly.

"Have you seen a ghost come in here?" Paul asked suddenly, hoping to wedge his question into Isobel's relentless introductions.

After a moment to consider, Isobel looked at him and said, "A ghost? No. We haven't seen anyone or anything since we came in."

"Then we need to go. We've lost one and we need to hurry up and find it." Paul said in a rush before the young woman could start talking again.

"Welcome to the family." Isobel chuckled, then watched as Paul and Toad hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"If all your relatives are like her, it's no wonder you don't talk." Paul said absently as he walked with Toad toward the room that G and Lenn had gone into.

Toad looked up at Paul with an amused smile and delight dancing in his eyes.

* * * * *

As they walked into the next room, they noticed that Lenn and G were talking to a pair of men, one of whom appeared to be in his fifties and the other much older.

"Paul, this is my cousin... our cousin, Mungo and his dad, Uncle Iain." G said with an air of formality that indicated to Paul that these were people that G respected.

"I'm sorry to interrupt." Paul said to the men, then looked at G and asked, "Did you find the ghost?"

"No. He didn't come in here." G said simply.

"Then we'd better go and help Nazzy and Vinda." Paul said decisively.

"Go on. I'll be right there." G said calmly.

Paul didn't expect the response, but could see that G was worried about something having to do with the two men. He was being unusually calm and gentle in their presence.

"I'll go with you." Lenn said quietly as he stepped away from G's side.

Paul gave a simple nod, then turned to leave.

As he was walking out the door, he just barely heard G quietly asking, "Are you okay, Mungo?"

* * * * *

Paul felt a sense of urgency building within him as he rushed down the hall, past the room where Isobel was located and on to the final room, where Nazzy and Vinda had gone.

Stepping into the room, it was obvious that it was a game room, or more precisely, a billiard room.

Nazzy appeared to have the ghost backed into a corner and was standing before it with his arms outstretched as Vinda hurriedly read aloud from her book.

When Nazzy heard Paul and the others enter the room, he reflexively turned to see who had joined them.

In that instant, the ghost made its move, slipping past Nazzy and floating across the room.

"Shit!" Vinda screamed as she turned and started to follow.

Before Paul could fully assess what was going on, the ghost slipped past him and into the hallway.

"Don't let it get away!" Nazzy called out as he started running toward the door.

Lenn was the first into the hallway and took off in a dead run to chase the ghost.

Paul and Toad ran out next, followed closely by Nazzy and Vinda.

"Did it get away from you?" G called out from the doorway farther down the hall.

"Not yet." Paul called in return, not slowing his pace.

* * * * *

"He went in here!" Lenn announced as he pulled open a large, but strangely plain looking iron door. Most of the doors in the castle were somewhat ornate, engraved with patterns or outfitted with some type of interesting hardware. This one was conspicuous in its bland normalcy.

As Paul hurried into the room, he was stunned by the size of it.

The room was astoundingly enormous, not only in width and length, but also in height.

The ghost was travelling across the expanse at an impressive speed.

"What is this place?" Paul asked as they ran across the room.

"If I had to guess, I'd say it's the throne room." G said as he finally was able to catch up to the others.

"Really?" Paul asked with surprise.

"I don't know. Like I said, it's just a guess. But what else would you do with a room this size?" G said honestly.

Before Paul could formulate an answer, the ghost disappeared through a closed door.

Lenn was the first to reach the door and quickly pulled it open.

* * * * *

"This isn't good." G said as he recognized where they were.

Paul could hear the sound of voices, not very far away.

"He went this way." Lenn said urgently, opposite from the direction that the voices were coming from.

Paul suddenly realized that they were in the hallway just off the dining room, where the reception had been held. He couldn't quite get his mind to wrap around the fact that they'd come full circle and were back where they'd started. But he was happy to realize that the ghost hadn't decided to go to the dining room and expose their transgression.

"What's down this way?" Nazzy asked as he hurried to follow Lenn.

"The kitchen and pantries and stuff like that." G answered.

"He went in here." Lenn said as he turned suddenly and stepped through a doorway.

The rest of the group followed, and all of them came to a sudden stop when they found that the room was occupied.

There were about a dozen people present, sitting around a large, plain table and none of them looked to be under sixty years old.

"Did anyone see a ghost come through here?" G asked loudly.

One of the few people that Paul recognized, Uncle Neese, pointed to a door at the far side of the room.

G led the way with determination, the others following.

"Is there a problem?" A woman asked with concern. It took a moment for it to register to Paul that the woman was G's Aunt Zennie. Being seated across the room, her red dress with black polka dots wasn't immediately evident.

"We accidentally let something out and we need to be sure that it gets put back. That's all." Paul assured her as he paused, hoping to do some damage control.

"I don't think any of us here have an aptitude for dealing with spirits, but I wish you luck on your endeavor." Aunt Zennie said sincerely.

"Thanks." Paul responded before hurrying with Toad out the door that Lenn, G, Nazzy and Vinda had already passed through.

* * * * *

Paul hurried through the adjoining room and as he stepped back out into the hallway, he nearly walked face-first into the ghost that was travelling directly toward him.

It veered away at the last moment and sped off down the hall.

"We almost had it!" G exclaimed in frustration as he took off running again.

Paul could feel himself getting tired, but started running anyway, joining the others.

* * * * *

"That's not good." G said as he stopped outside a doorway.

"Why not?" Paul asked as he stopped beside G and fought to catch his breath.

"That's the 'vault', where they keep the family silver. That room's supposed to be locked at all times." G said seriously as he tried to see into the darkness.

"Is there another door out of there?" Paul asked cautiously.

"How would I know? Do you think they'd ever let me go in there?" G asked frankly.

"No. There isn't another door." Lenn said simply, and sounded confident in his assertion.

"How do you know that?" G asked suspiciously.

"We've been around this room on all sides. Unless there's an exit through the roof or the floor, there's no other way out. And since this is supposed to be a vault, I seriously doubt that they'd put trap doors or secret passages in it." Lenn said reasonably.

"Can't it just go through a wall, like it did with the closed doors?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. At least, probably not. Walls are boundaries that are put into place in the physical world to restrict movement. Over time, the physical walls become spiritual walls, which is good, because that way not every spirit roaming the earth can walk into your home whenever it wants to. Besides that, the walls not only provide limits, but also structure. Without them, the spirits couldn't navigate the spiritual world. It would just be an expanse of nothing, not even ground to walk on." Vinda said seriously, then thought to add, "It would take a ghost with superior awareness and power to push through a spiritual barrier like that."

"So we can just wait here and not let it get out, right?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yes. We'll block the doorway and Vinda can recite her spell to send it back. The spell should work as long as the ghost is within the sound of her voice." G said confidently.

That being said, Vinda sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the doorway and took a few deep breaths before beginning to read.

The others gathered behind her, side by side.

All of a sudden, there was a clatter of something falling inside the vault.

"Should we go in and see what's happening?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Anyone who goes in there is taking the chance of getting blamed if anything's broken or missing." Lenn warned him.

"He's right. As long as we're all out here together, we're all each other's witnesses." G confirmed.

"Should we get someone with a key to come here and lock it up?" Paul asked quietly.

"Yeah. But not until after Vinda's gotten rid of it." G said firmly.

All of a sudden, the ghost was standing right in front of them.

It didn't hesitate to pass right through G and Paul, who were standing side by side.

'*Just when I thought that things couldn't get any weirder...*'

"Gross! I didn't think it'd do that!" Paul said with revulsion at the sensation.

"Aww Man! Now I smell like old people!" G said with disgust.

"Let's go after him!" Nazzy said as he started to run.

Before G could follow, Vinda put a hand on his shoulder to hold him back.

"Do you know who that was?" Vinda asked hopefully.

"A ghost! What more do you need to know?" G asked as he fought not to break away from her and run after Nazzy.

"Well, if I know its name, then I'll be able to send it back a lot easier." Vinda said patiently.

"No. I don't know." G said firmly, then snapped, "Come on!"

* * * * *

"Did you see which way it went?" G asked as he caught up to Nazzy and Lenn.

"In there." Nazzy said as he indicated the door that they were approaching.

"That's the kitchen. When we get inside, Lenn and I will go right. Paul and Toad, go left. Nazzy and Vinda, go up the middle." G said decisively.

'*That's my alpha.*'

* * * * *

As Paul hurried into the kitchen, he was as surprised as any of the others at the sight of Grandma Gruit with a slightly younger man, sitting with her at a table. From his appearance, Paul surmised that he was probably in his sixties.

"Are you responsible for this?" Grandma Gruit asked as she indicated the ghost that had stopped at her side.

"Yes, Ma'am." G said as he stood forward, to speak for the group.

"Thank you." Grandma Gruit said with a gentle smile at him.

Paul realized in that moment that a smile seemed to be completely out of place on her usually tightly controlled face.

"In case you haven't been introduced, this is my late husband, Ewan. He's also Tamhas' father." She said as she indicated first the ghost, then the man across the table from her. "What a wonderful Halloween gift. Thank you all."

Puzzled looks flashed around the group, none of them knowing how to respond.

"Are you going to need any help sending him back when you're done visiting?" G asked cautiously.

"I'll see that he gets home." Grandma Gruit assured him.

"Oh, well... It's nice to meet you Great-Grandpa Ewan. I'm G. We're just going to go... now." G stammered.

Since none of the rest of them had anything to add, they followed G out of the room in silence.

* * * * *

As the group meandered down the hallway, in the general direction of the great hall, Paul quietly asked, "What are we supposed to do now? Go to bed?"

"No. It's Halloween. If anyone has a family member who isn't a witch and doesn't know about us, they'll probably be going to bed now. The rest of us are going to wait until 'Night's Noontime' for the *real* celebration."

'*I don't know if he's trying to be spooky and give me the creeps...*'

'*But after everything that's happened, I'm really okay with it...*'

'*Bring it on!*'

The group walked out of the hallway and around the staircase to reveal the expanse of the great hall.

It looked as though everything from the wedding had been cleared away.

"Shouldn't we tell someone about the vault?" Lenn asked cautiously.

"Oh, yeah. Grandpa J is probably around here, somewhere. He's the best one to tell about it." G said decisively.

There wasn't any debate or even looks of question. The group simply followed along.

* * * * *

"Would you be here in search of a snack?" Grandma B asked warmly as they walked into the dining room.

"Actually, we were just looking for Grandpa J." G said honestly, but couldn't help himself and glanced at the variety of snack foods on the massive table.

"I'm thinking that he's in the sitting room... although I can't be sure. You never can tell with that one." Grandma B finished with a chuckle.

"Maybe we could stop for something to eat, first?" Nazzy cautiously suggested.

"No. We need to talk to Grandpa J." G said firmly.

Nazzy looked regretfully at the vast expanse of food, but didn't argue.

* * * * *

"Tadhg, did you have a good time?" Kat asked, when she noticed the group walking into the room.

Toad firmly held her gaze for a moment, then slowly closed his eyes, then just as slowly reopened them.

"That's wonderful, that is! I knew you'd be having fun. You've always been more socially attuned to the older crowd." Kat said as she pulled him into a hug.

Paul couldn't help but smile at the physical expression of caring that Toad and his mother shared.

"Grandpa J, we were just down by the kitchen and the vault door was open." G said urgently.

"You didn't go inside, did you?" Grandpa J asked cautiously.

"No. None of us did. I just thought that you'd want to know." G said seriously.

"Good. The last thing we need tonight is to have to deal with a curse." Grandpa J said frankly, then thoughtfully said, "It's strange, only someone who knows the wards should be able to unlock that door. I wonder who opened it." Grandpa J said thoughtfully.

"Well... the ghost of Great-Grandpa Ewan opened it. He seemed like he was kinda in a hurry and didn't close it again when he left." G said reluctantly.

"Dad's ghost is here?!" Grandpa J asked with excitement.

"Yeah. We left him in the kitchen with Grandma Gruit and Uncle Tamhas. Grandma Gruit said that she'd take care of him." G said cautiously.

"Well, Dad would certainly know how to nullify the wards. I'll go and check on that door now, then I'll stop by the kitchen for a visit." Grandpa J said as he stood from his easy chair.

G smiled as his grandfather excitedly left the room.

After a moment, Nazzy walked to G's side and put a hand on his shoulder.

G looked at him curiously.

"Food." Nazzy whispered.

G smiled, then responded, "I like that plan."

* * * * *

"G, your father was suggesting that you might be willing to help us out at the celebration tonight." Grandma B said in a rush as she approached him at the dining room table, loaded with snack foods.

"What did he promise that I'd do?" G asked cautiously.

"He was thinking that you might be willing to cast an illusion over the great hall to make things a bit more interesting for the celebration." Grandma B said hopefully.

"Interesting? Do you want it in flames or something?" G asked as he glanced at Paul to see if he might have any idea of what she was asking.

"No. No. Not flames. But the folding chairs look a bit... plain. He was suggesting that you might be able to come up with something a little more... showy." Grandma B said hopefully.

"I don't know. That's an awful lot of detail. And if I'm off, then someone could miss the chair when they go to sit down and there isn't a chair hiding out under my illusion." G said thoughtfully.

"If you're not up to it, we'll still be able to manage. Your father just thought that this might be an opportunity for you to be able to make a contribution and show the family how practical your ability can be." Grandma B said frankly.

'*Hold on a second. I see what you did there.*'

"It'll take me a little bit to get it all sorted out in my head. Am I going to have time?" G asked cautiously.

"We'll make the time. We've never done much in the way of decorations, and I think it will add a nice touch to tonight's celebration." Grandma B said warmly.

"I don't know if it'll work, but I'll give it a try." G said reluctantly.

"Maybe your new brother and your friends will be willing to help you get everything set up to your liking." Grandma B suggested as she looked at Paul, Nazzy, Vinda and Lenn.

'*Look at her go!*'

'*Grandma B knows how to work it!*'

"Do you guys want to help me?" G asked hopefully.

"Sure. If you'll tell us what we have to do." Nazzy answered easily.

'*Why not? It'll be good to have something to do to help out.*'

Paul nodded his agreement.

"Let's go see what we have to do." G said cheerfully as he started walking toward the door.

Nazzy and Vinda automatically followed.

Paul looked at Lenn and quietly asked, "Do you want to help us?"

"I don't think that my magical ability will be of any use." Lenn said frankly.

"I doubt that they're going to need any demons summoned to get the job done, so mine won't be any good, either. But we can still help move chairs and stuff." Paul said seriously.

"I'd better not. If people see you hanging around with me, they might start thinking that you're like I am." Lenn said quietly.

"Bad reputation, huh?" Paul asked simply.

"For the last couple of years... I did some stupid stuff... Now everyone thinks that that's who I am." Lenn said regretfully.

"My life has changed so much in the past two weeks I can't even tell you all of it. I didn't know anything about witches or magic or... myself, really. All of a sudden, everything changed, like, all at once. Maybe that's what you need, too." Paul suggested cautiously.

"What do you mean?" Lenn asked curiously.

"You told us that thing about your dad. Maybe you could use that big major change in your life as an excuse to make other changes. Decide how you want things to be, and then try to make them be that way." Paul said slowly.

"I don't know. I feel like if I try, that I'll just make a big mess of it, just like I always do." Lenn said as his eyes welled with tears.

'*Oh, poor little me...*'

'*Oh, well. Honestly, when your life goes to shit, sometimes you need that.*'

'*But once your pity party has run its course, it's time to put your testicles to good use.*'

Paul sat down in the chair next to Lenn's, then said in a quiet but firm voice, "You made mistakes. Guess what, you're going to make more. Accept it. That's life. Move on. The thing with your dad, that sucks. It's not fair. Guess what... That's life, too. Move on. Like it or not, what happens next is up to you. You need to change what you can, and deal with what you can't."

After a moment, Lenn cautiously asked, "Are all Americans as brash as you?"

"No. In fact, I'm not usually like this. Most of the time I'm quiet and I just react to whatever's happening to me. But sometimes that doesn't work and I have to stand up for myself. Right now, I can see that you're hurting. I know what that's like. Be who you want to be. Live like you want to live. Will things be perfect? No. They're probably going to suck. But as long as you keep going and you don't give up, you can make things better."

"Is that what you did?" Lenn asked cautiously, seeming to be on the verge of believing that things *could* improve for him.

"I tried to." Paul said simply, then reluctantly admitted, "I guess, to be honest, my life was pretty crappy until two weeks ago. But I didn't *live* like my life was crappy. I went to school and tried to make the best out of each day, no matter how bad it was. Sometimes things would get tough and it'd get me down, but I wouldn't let it *keep* me down. I guess that's what I'm really saying, shit's going to happen. Deal with it. Get over it. Keep moving forward."

'*Cue theme music, possibly something by Chumbawamba.*'

"When things were really bad at home, sometimes I'd go out and... steal things." Lenn quietly admitted.

"Yeah. That sounds like one of those 'cries for help' that you're always hearing about." Paul said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "How about next time you feel like doing something like that, you make a *literal* call for help?"

"What?" Lenn asked in confusion.

"Call me. I can't promise that I'll be able to help you figure things out, but at least I can listen and tell you that I agree that 'whatever it is' sucks and things like that." Paul said frankly.

"Paul, G's figured out what he's going to do. We could use some help with the chairs." Nazzy said as he approached.

"Okay. We'll be right there." Paul said easily, then looked at Lenn with question.

"I'll do it." Lenn finally said.

"Good." Paul said with a smile, then added, "Come on."

* * * * *

As soon as Nazzy, Paul and Lenn walked into the great hall, G quickly asked, "Will you guys start setting the chairs up over there? We're going to put them in a semicircle so that everyone can see the front."

Paul could see what G was saying and immediately went to work.

"Make sure you leave about a foot of space between the chairs. That way I can make my illusion look right." G said anxiously.

"Are you going to be able to keep your illusion up that long? You have a time limit, don't you?" Nazzy asked as he started setting up chairs.

"I don't know. I'm going to try. If my illusion fails in the middle of the ceremony, it won't really hurt anything." G said thoughtfully, then quickly said, "Lenn, would you space those out a little bit more?"

"Right." Lenn responded, then began readjusting the chairs that he had already positioned.

"How's this?" Vinda called from across the room.

"Could you move that row back a little? I'm going to need plenty of room to envelope each chair in an illusion.

"Are you going to be able to do this many?" Nazzy asked uncertainly.

"There's only one way to find out." G said frankly.

"I mean... there's so many of them..." Nazzy tried to explain.

"Yeah. But I'm going to put the same illusion on every chair. So I'll be doing the same thing over and over, not a bunch of different things, like I usually do." G fought to explain.

"Yeah. But still, there's so many." Nazzy said as he continued to carefully space his chairs.

"It'll work or it won't. If the whole family has to sit on plain old folding chairs, we're no worse off than if I hadn't tried." G said honestly.

"I guess not." Nazzy reluctantly agreed.

"Is this right?" Lenn asked uncertainly.

G looked at the area where he was working and finally said, "Yeah. That looks great."

"Are you going to do anything besides the chairs?" Vinda asked curiously.

"We'll just have to wait and see what I've got left to give once the chairs are done." G said frankly.

"I wish there was something that I could do to help you." Paul said honestly.

"You're doing it." G assured him.

Paul smiled at the response and renewed his efforts.

* * * * *

"How are things going in here?" Grandma B asked as she slowly walked into the great hall.

"Pretty good. How are we doing for time?" G asked as he looked around.

"A few people have shown up, but I'll be keeping them out of your way until you're ready for us." Grandma B said seriously.

"Is this enough chairs for everyone?" G asked cautiously.

"Yes. Probably more than enough, since the little ones have gone to bed by now." Grandma B said with a smile.

"Then I guess I'm ready. Would everyone stand back?" G asked as he also backed up, so that he could get a clear view of the entire room.

Since Paul didn't know which chairs G was going to change first, he watched carefully for whatever was going to happen.

All of a sudden, one of the chairs near him seemed to reform itself into a new configuration. A moment before it had been a plain gray folding chair, now it looked like a handcrafted work of art. The legs were engraved with long flowing patterns which terminated in 'feet'. The seat cushion appeared to be a lush velvet with gold embroidery. The back of the chair was low, and also had a cushion, embroidered in the same elegant style. At the top of the back, the golden wood was styled into ornamental filagrees that perfectly matched the pattern of the cushions.

'*G isn't just a witch, he's an artist.*'

As Paul looked up from the nearest example of G's work, he saw that well over half the chairs in the room had been transformed.

He held his breath, not wanting to take the chance of making a sound and interrupting G's concentration.

When the last chair had transformed, Paul looked at G with concern.

From G's expression, there was no doubt that he was feeling drained, but Paul saw the determination in his eyes as he looked around the expansive room, then dramatically raised his arms in a grand lifting gesture.

Suddenly tapestries began to appear and incredible gold and crystal chandeliers dropped from the ceiling.

Beneath their feet, red carpeting appeared, which was the same warm tone of red as in the chair cushions.

"G, that's wonderful, it is. You've done much better than I expected... better than I could have imagined." Grandma B said in wonder as she looked around the room.

"I'm not done yet." G said in a determined voice.

Paul wanted to object. He could see how far G had pushed himself. But he knew better than to interfere with G's achievement.

'*I'm right here with you.*'

'*I've got your back.*'

'***Be*** *the alpha.*'

G turned to face one of the few walls that didn't have a tapestry covering it.

A beautifully crafted frame appeared. Then within the frame a murky darkness started to form.

Everyone waited to see what was going to happen next.

But nothing did.

"I can't do it." G reluctantly admitted as the frame faded into nothingness.

"What were you trying to do?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"I was going to make a window. I've figured out how to make illusions that look like you're really seeing outside. As long as you're looking through the window, from that one fixed point of view, it looks like I've created the whole outside world." G said wearily, then added, "Creating all the other illusions must have been too much."

"I can make a *real* window, if that's what you want." Lenn cautiously offered.

"How's that?" G asked with interest.

"My magic is all about invisibility. I can make a section of the wall invisible so that you can *really* see outside."

"Can you undo it if it doesn't turn out right?" G asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Can you put the window frame back, like you had it?"

"Here you go." G said as he looked at the wall and the golden frame reappeared.

Lenn stepped forward and put both of his hands flat on the wall, then he seemed to lose himself in concentration.

As Paul watched, Lenn began to fade from sight.

Only the slightest transparent image of him remained in place, braced against the stone wall.

Suddenly, the wall began to go dark and seemed to be dissolving.

"Almost..." Lenn said with effort.

Paul glanced at him and could still see his vague outline.

"That's it." Lenn said with accomplishment.

Paul looked out the 'window' and all he could see was infinite blackness.

"That's not quite what I had in mind." G reluctantly admitted.

"We've got this." Nazzy said as he stepped forward.

"What's that?" G asked hesitantly.

"Well, since Toad isn't in here, I think that Vinda and I can shine some light on the situation." Nazzy said confidently.

"Fairy lights, you know, for stars?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"Sounds good. Go ahead, I'm going to go for an overall aura." Nazzy said simply.

Vinda nodded, then began to quietly chant.

Nazzy held his hands out and his skin color began to fade.

The increasing light outside the 'window' drew Paul's attention. The nightime world of the Scottish highlands began to unfold before his amazed eyes.

"Don't be making it too bright. This is supposed to be a midnight celebration." Grandma B warned them.

"How's that?" Nazzy asked as he lowered his arms.

"Eerie." Paul whispered.

'*I guess that sometimes being the alpha doesn't mean doing it all by yourself.*'

'*Asking for help isn't admitting defeat.*'

'*It's getting the job done.*'

'*What could be more **alpha** than that?*'

"Good. That's just what I was going for." Nazzy said with a grin, then turned to G and asked, "Do you think a few zombies on the front lawn might help to set the mood?"

G's eyes went wide and he suddenly asked, "Did you remember to send your zombies back?"

"Oh crap!" Nazzy said in realization.

"I'll go with you." Vinda immediately volunteered.

Nazzy glanced at G apologetically, then quietly said, "We'll be right back."

* * * * *

"Should we go with them?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. They'll be fine. Besides, I'm betting that they're probably going to appreciate having a few minutes alone together." G assured him.

"Oooh. Isn't it lovely?" An elderly woman exclaimed as she slowly walked into the room.

Paul looked past her to see many other members of the family entering the great hall.

"D's son, G, was the one to do the decorations." Grandma B said proudly as she gestured toward him.

"This is so nice." An older man said in amazement as he looked around.

Paul put an arm around G and hugged him tightly to express his pride in him.

"Let's go ahead and sit down, so that we can save some seats for Nazzy and Vinda." G said quietly.

Paul took one last look out the 'window' and marvelled at the eerie, yet beautiful sight of the Scottish highlands bathed in moonlight.

* * * * *

G seemed to be fixated on his illusions and was carefully looking at every detail to make sure that everything looked right.

When Paul noticed Lenn walking by, he quickly said, "You can sit with us if you want to, Lenn. We're just saving these two seats for Nazzy and Vinda."

"Thank you." Lenn said quietly as he sat down.

"G hasn't told me much about what's going on tonight. I know it's some kind of celebration, but that's about it." Paul said frankly.

"It's really just a family gathering. We do it on Halloween because we're witches and it's one of our high holidays, but that's mostly just tradition."

Paul slowly nodded, then hesitantly asked, "What are we going to be doing?"

"Nothing." Lenn answered simply, then at Paul's look of surprise, he explained, "This is a celebration of family and magic. So the different family groups get together and each one does a performance to show the family what they've been able to achieve."

"Are you going to be doing something like that?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. This is just for the adults. Every now and then, one of the kids might be brought in to help out with their family's demonstration. But for the most part, we're just here to sit back and enjoy the show." Lenn said honestly.

Paul thought about that for a moment, then slowly said, "When Toad came to do magic with us, his dad said something about him getting the chance to see what he might someday be able to achieve."

"I've never had it put to me that way, but that sounds a lot better than saying that we're not invited to participate."

"Since I've never been around this stuff before, I'm really interested to see what they're going to do." Paul said with a smile.

"You're going to love it." G said from Paul's other side.

Paul smiled at him, then asked, "So, does this mean that everyone in the whole family is going to get up to perform?"

"No. Some people have abilities that you can't really show off, like Grandma Gruit. She does spells, potions and charms. She can do some really awesome stuff, but I don't know how she could really show it off in front of people." G quietly explained.

"Some other people need special things for their magic to work. Great-Uncle Iain is like that. If he's beside a lake or a pool of water, he can do really incredible things with it. But standing here inside the castle, he can't use his magic much at all." Lenn added.

"Yeah, and there's some who just don't want to get in front of people, like Mungo." G said seriously.

"Is that what he was worried about, when we saw him before?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. Mungo's kind of... fragile, I mean, emotionally. He doesn't do well in large groups of people. Uncle Iain took him to a quiet place to calm him down after dinner and to prepare him for tonight." G carefully explained.

"For some reason, I thought that being a witch would mean that you wouldn't have problems like regular people." Paul said absently.

"Nope. If you hit us, we cry. If you cut us, we bleed. Of course, then we'll turn you into a toad, but that's beside the point." G finished with a smile.

"After meeting Toad, I can think of worse things to be." Paul said frankly.

"He's grown up a lot since the last time I saw him." G said admiringly.

"Everyone! May I have your attention!" Grandma B called out from the front of the room.

G quickly looked past the staircase toward the hallway to see if Nazzy and Vinda were on their way back yet.

"Should we go after them?" Paul asked cautiously.

"If we did, we'd probably walk in on something that we shouldn't." G said frankly.

"Oh. Right." Paul said as he realized what G was saying.

"I know that you haven't come all this way to listen to my banter, so I'll just ask Great Uncle Neese and Aunt Zennie to come up here and get us started." Grandma B said before stepping aside.

"What's Grandma B's magical ability? Do you know?" Paul asked curiously.

"Do you remember what Vinda was telling you about basic magic?" G asked in return.

"Yeah."

"Grandma B is a master of that kind of magic. Not only can she do the really basic stuff that just about everyone else can do, but she can do bigger and better versions of those spells. Think about it, with her magic, she keeps this entire castle clean, lighted, pest-free, warm and probably a dozen other things that I've never even thought about." G said seriously.

"Wow." Paul whispered as he watched Uncle Neese and Aunt Zennie slowly making their way to stand before the family assembly.

"First a wedding and now this. What a remarkable and wonderful day this has been. Add to that the fact that my brother Ewan is able to join us and it truly is a reason to celebrate." Uncle Neese said with a warm look toward the ghostly figure accompanying Grandma Gruit, Grandpa J and Tamhas.

Aunt Zennie stood forward, wearing red with black polka dots, as usual, and dramatically said, "This is our custom. This is our way. Let the celebration begin."

As she said the words, a swarm of thousands of ladybugs rose up from all around her. Aunt Zennie made a few hand gestures and the swarm moved to engulf the entire gathering, covering them with a living dome. All the ladybugs were moving in the same counter-clockwise direction and Paul found the sensation dizzying.

"As my daughter has said, it has begun." Uncle Neese called out firmly, then raised his hands upward, in what Paul was beginning to think of as a 'summoning' gesture.

Paul tried to follow where the ladybugs were going and realized that they seemed to be flying into the black polka dots on Aunt Zennie's dress. Within a minute, all the ladybugs had vanished. The dizzying swarm that had engulfed them all was simply... gone.

Before Paul could begin to process what he was seeing, a cloud of black started to rise up from behind Uncle Neese, emerging from his shadow on the floor. As soon as Paul saw them, he froze in place.

Bats.

Hundreds of black bats started fluttering up into the air.

Paul didn't have any logical reason to be afraid, but he was.

Something about the creatures had always been off-putting to him and seeing them in the flesh made it that much worse.

Uncle Neese made a thrusting gesture toward the assembled family and his bats responded.

Just as with Aunt Zennie's ladybugs, the bats surrounded the family gathering and all of them seemed to be flying in the same direction.

"If any of your relatives are about to summon spiders, tell me now. I'll leave." Paul whispered firmly.

"I don't know of anyone who does that, but if someone turns up, I'll be right behind you." G assured him.

When Uncle Neese lowered his hands, all the bats returned to him. The living cloud of bats moved as a single being and seemed to disappear into Uncle Neese's shadow.

Applause started on the other side of the room, then seemed to catch on to everyone else.

"What you've just seen were examples of mass summoning and control. That's *really* hard to do." G said seriously.

Paul could imagine that it was.

"What did we miss?" Nazzy asked as he and Vinda rushed into the room.

"Bats and ladybugs. They just started. We saved you seats." G said as he indicated the empty chairs beside him.

"Thanks." Nazzy said appreciatively.

"Did you get all your zombies put to bed?" G asked with a smile.

"Yeah. They were right where I left them. No problem." Nazzy said happily.

"Uh oh." Paul said when he saw who was getting up to perform.

"What's wrong?" G asked with concern.

"Toad and I met Isobel before... I tell you what, just wake me up when she's done talking." Paul said frankly.

'*Or in the morning, whichever comes first.*'

"That's Isobel, alright. You know, I don't think I've ever heard her brother, Gilles, speak. I wonder if he can." G said thoughtfully.

"He probably wonders if he can, too. If he's always around Isobel, he's never going to get the chance to find out." Paul said with a grin.

"I guess you already know who Grace and Wanda are, so that's everyone." G said frankly.

"I know their names, but I don't know which is which... witch." Paul finished with a smirk.

G rolled his eyes at the terrible pun.

'*Give me a break! Sometimes you just have to go for it.*'

"The one with the darker hair is my mom, Wanda." Lenn said quietly.

"There's something I don't understand. Does your specialty of magic come from your parents or is it always a completely random 'luck of the draw'?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's a little of both. Families tend to have similar abilities, but every now and then something can pop up out of nowhere, that no one ever expected." G explained.

"There's been a few divorces caused by that." Nazzy interjected from G's other side.

"Yeah. When two summoners pop out a weather witch, questions will be asked." G confirmed.

"But what do you think's going to happen with our sister? Your dad makes inanimate things come to life and my mom summons demons... how is that going to work?" Paul asked curiously.

"We'll just have to wait and see." G said simply.

"Who did the spell on the room, again?" A voice called from the front.

"I did." G immediately responded.

"Thank you. It's lovely. This is going to make everything so much nicer." She said gratefully.

Paul looked at her, then asked, "That's Grace, right?"

"Yeah, she's Gilles and Isobel's mom." Lenn confirmed.

Paul had been keeping an eye on the front and was surprised to see the only man up there suddenly shrink into a tiny, skinny little five year old boy.

"Gilles is like G, he doesn't get stronger when he's transformed." Lenn said quietly.

"What's his power?" Paul asked curiously.

"He's becoming a master of curses. From what my mom says, he's got a real talent for it." Lenn said frankly.

Before Paul could think of what to say, Wanda, Grace and Isobel all suddenly became smaller, much like Gilles, except that they had wings.

"Their clothes changed." Paul said suddenly.

"What?" G asked from his other side.

"When they transformed, their clothes changed to fit them." Paul said seriously.

"Oh, yeah. That's not something that I've ever had to worry about, since I don't change size when I transform. I know that it's a basic spell, but there was never a reason for me to learn it." G said frankly.

"I have a clothing spell, but I don't think it'd be much help." Lenn said seriously.

"How's that?" Paul asked curiously.

"I have a spell that makes my clothes turn invisible when my body does... I doubt that you'd want something like that." Lenn said quietly.

"Um, no. Thanks. I can't see me having a need for invisible clothes." Paul said honestly.

"There are lots of members of the family who have physical transformation abilities. I bet that most of them use basic spells to adjust their clothes so that they don't have to worry about them getting ripped up." G said frankly, then motioned toward the front, where Wanda, Grace and Isobel were flying around above Gilles at a dizzying speed.

"I'd throw up if I had to do that." Lenn said absently.

"Yeah." Paul responded as he watched, then smiled when he saw that Gilles had taken out a wooden flute and began to play.

"Here they go." G said carefully as he kept his focus on the performance.

The three little 'fairies' were flying faster and faster and even though Paul was all the way in the back, he could feel a breeze being generated by them.

All of a sudden, Paul could see a miniature tornado beginning to form.

"If we were outside, a *real* five year old could probably do that, but to create a tornado inside a building takes a lot of power and skill." Lenn said informatively.

The three 'fairies' landed just as Gilles played the last notes of his little tune.

Applause started up and Paul joined in. Even though he didn't know exactly how much time and effort went into planning such a thing, he could easily believe that what they had done was worthy of praise.

All four of the 'performers' returned to their adult forms and seemed to be pleased with themselves as they went back to their chairs.

A man stepped forward and seemed to have a bit of swagger in his step.

Paul didn't know who he was but felt an automatic dislike for him. He didn't know if it were the obviously fake tan, the gaudy gold jewelry, the really bad comb-over or a combination thereof.

"That's Uncle Pear." G said unenthusiastically.

"The douchebag?" Paul asked to confirm.

A yelp of laughter sounded from Paul's other side.

He looked at Lenn curiously.

"It's not that you called him that, but that you came to that conclusion without even meeting him." Lenn tried to say past his laughter.

"G warned me about him, yesterday."

"Oh? Did he warn you about me, too?" Lenn asked cautiously.

"Yeah."

"What did he say?"

"That you steal things." Paul said simply.

"Oh." Lenn said quietly.

"Well, you do. What's the big deal? You said that you're not going to do that anymore. I believe you. I think we're good." Paul said simply.

"Is that all he said?" Lenn asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It was a warning, just the same way that I'd hope that *you'd* warn me about someone who might hurt me." Paul said seriously.

Lenn slowly nodded, then pointed toward the front of the room before saying, "Never believe one word that man says. He will use you until there's nothing left for him to take."

"Okay... I'll remember that." Paul said with surprise.

'*Cue theme music reprise.*'

Paul noticed that Uncle Pear had transformed into some grotesque overly muscled rabbit-human hybrid thing.

"He looks scary but if you do so much as say 'boo' to him, he'll run away crying." Lenn said frankly.

"Good to know." Paul said as he watched Uncle Pear change back to his usual appearance.

Paul wasn't quite sure which was more disturbing and finally decided that his forms were equally unpleasant, each in their own way.

* * * * *

"Here we go, I think you're going to like this." G said when he saw who was getting up in front of the group.

"Who's that?" Paul asked curiously, since he was sure that he hadn't been introduced to either of the elderly couple who were standing.

"That's Great Aunt Euna and Great Uncle Paden. I'm not sure, but I think that Great Aunt Euna is Grandpa Ewan and Great Aunt Deoirdh's sister." G said thoughtfully, then added, "I'm going to drop the Greats and great greats. If you want to know how many generations back they are, just ask."

"Okay." Paul automatically agreed, then cautiously said, "I remember Grandpa Ewan, but who is Great Aunt De... however you say it?"

"She's Uncle Neese's wife... late wife. As far as I know, she's not here." G said seriously.

Paul slowly nodded, then turned his attention forward, since it seemed like the elderly couple were just about ready to do... whatever they were going to do.

Between one moment and the next, the man, Uncle Paden, was suddenly replaced by a large angry looking dog.

"That's one of the full transformations that I was telling you about." G whispered.

While Paul watched in wonder, Aunt Euna began to deform into a hideous beast that Paul could only describe as a 'hag'. Her wart covered skin had turned a sickening shade of green and her hair had become a tangled mess of white, sticking out in every direction. Her gnarled hands were dangerous looking claws and every breath she took was a sickening wheeze.

"In a fight, they would both use their transformed physical forms. Neither one of them have any offensive magic... at least, that's what Dad told me. I've never really talked to them much, since I'm not from their family line." G said simply.

"Toad's their great grandson." Lenn added.

Paul nodded as he watched the dog and the hag both snarling at the family.

A moment later, Paul watched carefully as they began to return to their regular 'human' forms.

By all appearances, they were an extremely elderly couple. No people Paul had ever met appeared to be less threatening.

The applause seemed to rise up from all around him and Paul enthusiastically joined in.

"Imagine it, being that old and being able to do a complex transformation like that. It's really amazing." G said admiringly.

Paul hadn't been around such things long enough to know what an accomplishment it was, but he trusted G's assessment of the situation.

Another elderly couple stepped forward. They weren't quite as old as Aunt Euna and Uncle Paden, but they were certainly somewhere around retirement age.

"That's Uncle Gawain, I'm named after him!" G said quickly.

Paul smiled at the announcement.

"He's Uncle Paden and Aunt Euna's son. He's with his wife, Aunt Coira." G said informatively.

"What are their abilities?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's best to wait and see, but I'll tell you that they're both able to transform. This is one of those cases where it runs in the family." G said frankly.

Without much prelude, the man began to increase in size. His hair grew incredibly fast and within a matter of seconds, he had transformed into a classic werewolf.

Paul sat in amazement.

He could feel his heart racing at the sight.

'*Without a doubt, Uncle Gawain is amazing.*'

'*I'm glad that G has a namesake who is worthy.*'

Paul had so much of his attention focused on Uncle Gawain that he had almost forgotten Aunt Coira.

A movement caused Paul to look away from the impressive sight of Gawain for a moment and he was stunned again.

Aunt Coira had transformed into a black bear.

No matter how impressive the werewolf was, seeing them side by side, it appeared as though Aunt Coira could probably defeat Uncle Gawain in two minutes or less.

When the applause sprang up, Paul automatically joined in.

He was frankly in awe. The animal transformations were beyond anything that he could have ever imagined.

'*Thank goodness that I watched all those black and white movies, otherwise I would have been* ***totally*** *unprepared.*'

Aunt Coira and Uncle Gawain changed back to themselves and Paul once again noticed that their clothes appeared to be unchanged after the transformation. He resolved himself to do further investigation so that he wouldn't have to stop and take off his shoes every time he wanted to transform.

When the next group stepped forward, Paul smiled, since he recognized two of the three.

"Is Toad here, or did he get sent to bed?" Paul thought to ask.

"He's right there." G said as he pointed.

"Who's the other guy with Toad's parents?" Paul quietly asked G.

"Uncle Lachlan, he's Aunt Kat's brother. They're Uncle Gawain and Aunt Coira's kids."

"How many generations do we have here?" Paul asked hesitantly.

"Four, I think." G said consideringly, then quickly added, "At least, above ground."

Paul tried to fight down the smile at the response to his question.

"Do you think anyone from your family will do anything?" Lenn asked G quietly.

"Grandpa J might. Most of the rest don't have anything to show. They do charms or they're drainers." G said thoughtfully.

"Drainer? What's that?" Paul asked cautiously. He didn't like the sound of that.

"Just what it sounds like, their power is to steal your power. Aunt Kyla can use the power that she steals, but not at full strength and she has to know their spells. Her mom, Aunt Lyall, can steal your power, but she can't use it." G said instructively.

Before Paul could respond, he saw Kat, Horst and Lachlan stand in a row, obviously ready to show their abilities.

Kathryn transformed first, becoming a werecat creature that was both beautiful and deadly. Once her transformation was complete, Horst began to grow into an enormous mass of muscle. Whereas Uncle Pear's transformation gave the impression of 'muscles for show', Horst's muscles had the appearance of 'muscles for beating anything in his path into a bloody pulp'. The third and final member of their group then began to grow and hair began to sprout from just about everywhere at once.

It took a moment for Paul to recognize the creature that Lachlan had become. Much like Kat and Horst, his transformation appeared to be halfway between 'human' and something else. In his case, he seemed to be a half-gorilla.

"I bet you weren't expecting that." G chuckled from his side.

Paul looked at him for a long moment before responding, "I doubt that *anyone* could have predicted *anything* that's happened to me in the past eight hours."

"Safe bet." G said with a grin, then turned his attention back to the show.

After turning back to their 'human' forms, Kat, Horst and Lachlan went back to their seats.

There was a long pause that followed and people started whispering to each other, wondering if everyone had had their chance to present.

Paul was looking around and was surprised to see Grandpa J and D walking down the staircase.

One by one, the other attendees noticed that they were approaching and fell silent.

When D was finally at the front of the gathering, he looked around, then said, "I hope you realize how much I love all of you. I love you enough to interrupt my wedding night."

A few chuckles went around the room.

"G, great job on the decorating. You outdid yourself." D said appreciatively.

"I had help." G called in return.

"Dad asked that we provide the closing entertainment for the night, so let's do this." D said with a smile, then gestured past the crowd, toward the dining room.

Several of the dining room chairs began scampering into the great hall, under their own power.

A moment later, a collection of coffee tables, ottomans and comfortable cushioned chairs from the lounge followed.

Laughter began to spring up around the room as everyone watched the furniture playfully frolicking.

Paul felt a tremor, as if there had been a distant explosion or an earthquake.

A moment later, he felt it again and looked at G with question.

"It's Grandpa J." G said simply.

As Paul was about to ask G what he meant, he caught sight of a living statue, slowly walking into the great hall under its own power.

"Grandpa J can animate stone... but only if it's carved to look like a living thing." G said slowly.

"So your dad can make a chair walk, but your grandfather needs something that looks like a living thing?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah. And from what Grandpa's told me, the way his works, he can kind of give his statues a 'taste of life' so that he doesn't have to tell them, like, 'step, step, step', he can just say, 'go in there' and they'll know how to do it." G said seriously, then added, "Dad actually has to tell his things every step of what they're supposed to do. He's more like a puppet master."

Paul looked back at the collection of furniture 'playing', then looked at D curiously. Now that he was paying attention, he could see the level of concentration that D was using to control every action of every piece of furniture.

The ground shook as the statue took another step and Paul began to realize just how big the thing was. From a distance, he had known that it was big, but now he estimated that the thing must be at least fifteen feet tall.

The statue took one more step, then stopped, freezing in place. It took a moment for Paul to realize that the pose that the statue had stopped in was one of bowing with respect.

"That's it! Thank you everyone. Goodnight!" D said loudly.

"Let's shut it down." G said decisively, then asked, "Nazzy and Vinda, will you undo your lights?"

"Sure." Nazzy said, then looked at Vinda and waited for her to be ready.

They simultaneously made gestures toward the window, and the moonlit scenery turned into complete darkness.

"Lenn, are you ready?" G asked hopefully.

As an answer, Lenn looked toward the window and concentrated. In the space between one moment and the next, the seemingly open space was replaced by a solid wall.

"Here it goes." G said as he raised his hands, then dramatically let them fall. As he did, the chandeliers, the tapestries, the beautifully ornate chairs and the carpeting all vanished, replaced by gray stone and folding chairs.

A round of applause sounded, acknowledging the wonderful job that G had done.

"You did good." D said appreciatively as he approached.

"Are you going to need any help getting everything put back?" G asked cautiously.

"No. I've got it." D said as he glanced at the furniture.

Paul watched in wonder as everything slowly turned and started to go back to where it had come from.

"You two should get upstairs to bed. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day." D said frankly.

"What's happening tomorrow?" G asked cautiously.

"We're going to be travelling back to the States." D said frankly.

"You could have given us some warning!" G yelped.

"That's what I'm doing right now." D said with a grin.

"We're going to need to hang around here for a little bit to clean up and put the chairs away." G said as he looked around.

"Don't worry about that. I'll get it." D said with a glance at the folding chairs and a simple gesture of his hand. In unison, all the unoccupied chairs began walking themselves over to a place along the wall and folding themselves.

"Thanks, Dad." G said with a grin, then looked to Paul and asked, "Are you ready?"

"If we're leaving first thing in the morning, then I'd like to say goodbye to Toad." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. Me, too." G admitted.

Paul then turned to Lenn and said, "I live with G, you know how to get in touch with us, don't you?"

"Yeah." Lenn assured him.

"Anytime, day or night, if you need to talk, one of us will be there for you." Paul said firmly.

"Okay." Lenn responded, then thought to add, "You can call me, too."

"We will." Paul promised.

"So, it sounds like we'll all be flying out together." Nazzy said from G's other side.

"Yeah. I can think of worse things." G said with a grin.

"I doubt that I'll get much school work done on *this* trip." Paul said as the group started walking.

"You're not going to need it anyway." G said simply.

"Why not?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Well, now that you're 'one of us', you're going to get to see the *real* school." G said with a smirk.

After a moment to consider, Paul finally said, "I can't wait to get started."

The End

Parvenu 3: Otherland

© 2017 by MultiMapper
All Rights Reserved

Chapter 1

Paul was still coming to terms with being a world traveller. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined that he'd ever have an opportunity to do anything like visiting another country.

Even so, the next challenge before him was to adapt to a whole new way of life... and beyond that, a whole new state of being. His disorientation was compounded by the fact that he had only just arrived back in the United States the previous evening.

Sitting in the car, Paul tried to focus his attention on what D was saying to him. "It may take a little arm-twisting, but I'm sure that I'll be able to get your status changed this morning so that you can get right to your classes. Who knows? Maybe you'll be placed in some classes with G."

"Is that okay with you?" Paul asked his newly adopted brother with concern.

A roll of G's eyes in Paul's general direction before turning his attention forward again was his only acknowledgement.

> '*It's not that G accepts me that makes me feel good.*'
>
> '*It's that he's so certain of it that he wouldn't dignify the question with a response.*'

"There's a good chance that Nazareth and Ravindra will probably be in your classes too." D added.

"I couldn't even keep up with regular classes. I don't know how I'm going to do in... what do you call it? Witch school?"

"We just call it school." G said with an affectionate grin at him.

"Try thinking of it like transferring from the general education to the college prep courses. You'll be expected to learn different disciplines but the format is basically the same." D said frankly.

"Except that I'll be learning about magic and spellcasting and..." Paul trailed off anxiously with freshly renewed panic.

"How did you end up doing with the math classes, before we left?" G asked in a tone of voice that demanded an answer.

"I never even got the first clue about what they were talking about." Paul said despondently.

"So, no matter how good or bad things go today, you're no worse off than you were before." G said reasonably.

I thought about that for a long moment, then quietly responded, "Yeah. But at least I know the basics in regular school."

"Paul, you have nothing to base your expectations on, so I can understand that you're feeling uneasy."

'*Uneasy? Ya think?!*'

'*See: Understatement.*'

"Although I'm not on staff at the school, as the parent of an active student, I like to keep abreast of current policies and procedures."

Paul cautiously nodded that he was following along with what D was saying.

"Every year the school has a small number of students admitted who have only just awakened to their powers and need some help to come to terms with being exposed to the greater world. The school has experienced people and well proven procedures in place to help new students, just like you, exactly in your situation."

"But what about me being a half... you know." Paul asked reluctantly.

"Although it's not necessarily common, it's not unheard of. I wouldn't go around announcing it to everyone you meet, but if people find out, they'll probably look upon it as a curiosity for a day or two, then forget all about it." D said frankly.

"Who knows, maybe if you're lucky the people who find out will be demon fanboys, like Nazzy." G provided with a smile.

"I don't know if that's better or worse than people not liking me because of what my biological father is." Paul said honestly.

"When you get past all the magic and secrecy, I'm sure that most of what you'll be facing is the same kind of thing that you'd face at any other high school." D explained.

'*Oh? You mean living hell?*'

'*That's all you had to say.*'

'*"It's going to be living hell", and I would have understood.*'

* * * * *

"Hopefully I'll see you in class." G said as they walked into the school, then he quickly added, "If not, I'll see you at lunch."

"I'll see you then." Paul said quietly as he watched G walk off in another direction.

After a long silent moment of walking down the hallway, D quietly said, "It'll be alright. I'll see to it."

"Thank you." Paul said sincerely.

He still believed that it was going to be horrible, but it meant the world to him that his adoptive father would take the time and trouble to try and make things better.

* * * * *

When they walked into the office and the woman behind the desk jumped to her feet to attend to D right away, Paul couldn't help but smile.

"Mr. Darroch, how can I help you today?" Janice asked eagerly.

"It seems that my son has had a change of status recently, so I'd like to see that his schedule is updated accordingly." D said diplomatically.

'"*My son.*" *I'll never get tired of hearing him say that.*'

"Oh? I see. Well, since your son is already enrolled, that shouldn't be any problem. I assume that he'll be needing an *evaluation* before his placement." Janice said in a leading tone.

"Yes. Although I have some inkling of what it will reveal, I believe that a professional evaluation of Paul's strengths will assure that he will receive the most appropriate education." D said seriously.

"Yes. Dr. Williams is very thorough in his evaluations. I'll personally see to it that your son will be scheduled to have everything that he needs to succeed." Janice said eagerly.

"While I'm thinking of it, Paul's mother and I were married day before yesterday..."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you." D said with a courteous smile, then continued, "Paul has expressed a desire to have his surname changed to Darroch, so I was wondering if it would be possible to reflect that in his school records. It may take a day or two to get all the official paperwork in line, but it seems as though it would be least confusing for all involved to have his name listed on all documentation as 'Paul Darroch' from this point forward."

"That's no problem. Although his original name will still be listed in the computer until we receive the official paperwork, all his class schedules and such will show his preferred name." Janice assured him.

"Thank you." D said with another hint of a smile, then asked, "What else will I need to do to get Paul's status changed?"

"Nothing. Paul is already enrolled, so all I have to do is make the status changes to his file and wait for the results of the evaluation." Janice said confidently.

"Then I'll leave you to it." D said simply, then turned to Paul and said more quietly, "Don't hesitate to call me if you have *any* problems at all."

"Okay." Paul agreed, feeling inordinately pleased at his new father's show of concern for him.

'*I don't know if this is what all dads are like.*'

'*But I think that maybe this is what all dads should be.*'

While Paul and D were talking, Janice darted behind her desk for a moment and made a quick call.

"Dr. Williams is expecting you. His office is just next door, down the hall on your right." Janice said as she hung up the phone.

"Thank you again. You've been very helpful." D said gratefully, then pulled Paul into an unexpected hug.

Paul didn't know how to react to that, but took a moment to appreciate the wonderful feeling.

"Have a good day." D said quietly as he released Paul.

"You too." Paul said warmly.

Paul watched as D left the office.

He took a moment to collect himself, then forced himself to follow, taking the next steps on the path to his new future.

As anxious as Paul had been earlier, he now had the sense that there was a chance that things might *possibly* turn out alright.

* * * * *

Paul walked into the office to find a rather imposing figure waiting for him.

"Dr. Williams?" Paul guessed.

"Good morning. And who might you be?" The large black man asked as he stepped forward to shake Paul's hand. Paul wasn't sure, but he took the man's accent to be Caribbean in origin, possibly Jamaican.

"My name is Paul Darroch, but it still might be listed as Paul Hiller in my file." Paul said quietly.

Dr. Williams walked to his computer and typed in a brief inquiry. He read the results before turning and asking, "Do you understand why you're here with me today?"

"It sounded to me like you were going to test me or something to figure out what kind of magic I should be studying." Paul said frankly.

"I will be evaluating your strengths and presenting my findings to the educators. They will make any decisions regarding your studies."

"So, what do I have to do now?"

"Come back to the examination room and let me have a look at you. After that, I'll have my assistant run a few tests, then I'll send you back to the administration office so that they can schedule your classes."

"Is it going to hurt?" Paul asked as he reluctantly followed.

"Most certainly not! I use only the latest and most advanced diagnostic spells and charms." Dr. Williams said firmly.

Something occurred to Paul and before he could think better of it, the words just slipped out, "You're a witch doctor."

Dr. Williams looked at Paul with surprise at the revelation, then considered his words before carefully saying, "That could be taken in two distinctly different ways, one being the fact that I am both a witch and a doctor, and the other referring to me being a practitioner of a particular type of ancient magic, derived from centuries old tribal customs and beliefs."

"I'm sorry..." Paul began to say, but was interrupted.

"As it happens, I am both." Dr. Williams continued.

Paul looked at him with surprise.

"I don't know anything about your ancestry, so I can't presume to draw any parallels between us. But in the magical practice of my own culture, most commonly referred to as Vodou, witch doctors used various ritualistic methods to inspire them to achieve the desired results. Onlookers would see a particular ritual and believe that it was those actions that caused the magic to happen. In fact, some of the witch doctors themselves didn't understand that the ritual was only there to inspire the desired emotion to allow the magic to coalesce in the proper way." Dr. Williams said as they walked into the examination room. He finished by gesturing toward an elevated bed, indicating for Paul to take a seat.

"I don't understand." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"Different magics require different emotional states. If your spell requires concentration and you attempt it with passionate resolve, the spell will be more likely to fail. Likewise, if your spell requires passion and you attempt to cast it solemnly and ritualistically, it will also be prone to failure. You need to be in the

proper frame of mind for your magic to work predictably." Dr. Williams carefully explained.

"I kind of thought that it just... happened when you wanted it to." Paul said weakly.

"That's why you're here, so you can learn what is required to make the most use of the gifts that you've been given." Dr. Williams said with a smile of accomplishment, then pulled a large multi-colored magnifying glass on a swing arm from beside the bed and started looking at Paul through it.

After a moment, Paul cautiously asked, "What do you see?"

"Your aura. This reveals a person's magical essence, if you know how to interpret what you're seeing." Dr. Williams said slowly as he examined Paul carefully.

Paul waited, not knowing if he really wanted to know what the doctor could tell about him.

"You're a cambion, aren't you?" The doctor asked as he carefully moved the magnifying glass aside.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what that is." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"A half-demon. I can make out some prominent infernal influences in your magic." Dr. Williams quietly explained.

"Oh, um, yeah. You can really see that, just by looking at me with that thing?" Paul asked anxiously.

"As I said, it's there if you know what to look for." Dr. Williams confirmed, then continued by asking, "Is this your resting form?"

"I have no idea what you're asking me." Paul said honestly.

"When you wake up in the morning do you look like this, or do you have to change yourself into a more 'human' looking form to go out in public?" Dr. Williams asked seriously.

"No. I wake up looking like I do right now." Paul quietly answered.

"Good. Then, have you learned how to make yourself transform?"

"Yes. I mean, it happened by accident the first time, but I've learned how to make it happen when I want it to since then." Paul rushed to explain.

"Would you mind changing for me now?" Dr. Williams asked hopefully.

"Okay. But I'll need to take off my shoes and... I don't want to mess up the uniform that G loaned me. I'll probably need to take it off, too."

"Go ahead. No one will interrupt the exam." Dr. Williams assured him.

Paul reluctantly got off the bed, then started undressing, feeling uncomfortable under the doctor's clinical gaze.

As Paul was undressing, Dr. Williams quietly said, "Although not many cambion's attend our school, it isn't unheard of. I don't think we have any currently enrolled, but all the staff have the experience of helping someone of mixed parentage."

Paul stepped out of his pants and carefully folded them, then placed them on the foot of the bed.

"I think I'm ready." Paul said nervously, standing in front of the doctor, wearing only his underwear.

"Go ahead. I simply need to see your manifestation so I can determine if any special accommodations will be needed in your training."

"Like what?" Paul asked as he gave the internal 'push' to start the change.

"For some, it is wise to have a fire extinguisher close at hand. For others, it's necessary to be in a wide open location, well away from anything fragile." Dr. Williams said casually as he watched Paul growing taller and gaining body mass as well as horns.

"This is about it." Paul said in his much lower voice, and once again had to adjust his balance as he fought to remain standing on his newly formed hooves.

"Very nice. You seem to have reasonable control of your transformation and your resulting demonic visage appears to be temperamentally stable. There are some who, after years of training, are never able to achieve this state. You're starting off with quite an advantage." Dr. Williams said approvingly.

"Does that mean that some people go crazy when they transform?" Paul asked cautiously, still feeling uncomfortable with Dr. Williams watching him.

"Some, through no fault of their own, will cause magical eruptions while they struggle to transform; fire mostly. Once transformed, there are those who are 'feral' for lack of a better term. They lose the ability to use their higher reasoning." Dr. Williams said informatively.

"To be honest, when I'm like this I feel like I want to *use* my strength. I want to beat and break and tear through things. Standing here and being quiet is making me antsy." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"That's perfectly normal and natural." Dr. Williams assured him, then absently added, "You can change back and dress now, if you would like."

"Thanks." Paul muttered, then immediately reverted to his 'human-looking' appearance.

"As I have said, I play no part in assigning your academic requirements, so I can't make any promises on that front. But I feel safe in saying that in the course of your training that you will be given tasks to perform that will challenge you, thereby satisfying some of your more primal urges." Dr. Williams said as he walked to the nearby computer and started typing.

"Tasks? Does that mean that you're going to be training me to... do stuff, like jobs?" Paul asked cautiously as he dressed.

"Not specifically. You're not going to be groomed to be a 'fighter' or 'assassin' or anything like that. You'll be trained to use your strengths and overcome your weaknesses so that when you leave here, you'll have the skills you need to pursue whatever course in life that you choose."

"I guess it's my, um... normal, upbringing that made it sound to me like you were training a team of superheroes... or villains." Paul said timidly.

"I suppose that there might be some parallels in our training techniques. We encourage students to learn to use their abilities in concert with others to achieve greater goals than they could on their own. But in the outside world that's called 'teamwork'. It's an important social skill to develop. And to be honest, witches have a tendency to isolate themselves. So we do our best to foster the social skills to minimize that." Dr. Williams said frankly.

Paul looked himself over to be sure that he hadn't missed anything while dressing, then he looked at Dr. Williams uncertainly.

"Just remain here and my assistant will be joining you in a moment to do some tests. They're nothing invasive or embarrassing, I promise you. They'll simply gauge your magical aptitude to aid in your placement." Dr. Williams assured him.

"What about the *cambion* thing? I didn't know about witches at all until a few days ago, so I don't know how things work. How big of a deal is it?" Paul asked cautiously, remembering D's advice from earlier.

"That's going to be up to you. I'm sure that there will be those who will look down upon you if they find out. But for others it will be a point of interest that will make them want to get to know more about you. If you let people know, there will undoubtedly be consequences, but try to keep in mind that not all consequences are negative." Dr. Williams said before leaving the room.

Paul hoisted himself back onto the examination table and sat for a long quiet moment as he tried to assimilate all that had been revealed to him.

'*I'm a cambion.*'

'*So what?*'

'*I'm still me.*'

'*In fact, I'm more **me** than I've ever been before.*'

'*I'm not trying to fit myself into a mold that wasn't made for me.*'

'*I'm becoming the person I was born to be.*'

* * * * *

At the end of testing, Paul didn't know anything more than he had at the beginning.

Dr. Williams' medical assistant, Indra, was pleasant enough, but also completely professional as she went about her duties.

At one point, Paul was asked to hold a wooden ball in his left hand. He did so and sat still and silent as Indra intently watched. At some cue that Paul couldn't determine, Indra seemed to be satisfied and told him that he had done well.

There was another point where Indra asked him to sit still as she held a ziplock bag of something that looked like mercury over his head. She didn't ask him to do anything, she just held it there until she was satisfied, then put it away and made more notes on the computer.

Near the end of their testing, Indra took him into a different room where a box of about fifty rocks sat on a table. She led him to the box and asked him to sort them. When he asked her 'into what', she said that that was the test and left him to do it.

A few of the rocks were crystals, but most of them appeared to be uninteresting, ordinary rocks. Some were rough, some rounded, some large and others small. In the end, Paul divided them into five categories, with just a few odd stones being in the fifth. He didn't really have names for the categories, but certain stones just seemed to go together.

When Indra returned, she seemed unaccountably pleased with his method of sorting and happily entered the results into the computer.

Following the rock sorting, Indra left the room and Dr. Williams returned a few minutes later. All he really said was that the testing was concluded and that Paul should return to the administration office and wait for them to assign his new class schedule.

Paul thanked the doctor and shook his hand before leaving.

* * * * *

As Paul walked into the office, Janice immediately noticed and told him, "Mrs. Bright is evaluating your test results right now. If you'll have a seat, she'll join you in just a minute."

"Thank you." Paul stammered with surprise. Her suddenly solicitous behavior made him wonder if Marsha might have had a little talk with Janice regarding 'customer service'.

'*Who am I kidding?*'

'*This is what it's like to be D's son.*'

'*He's respected and admired. And no one who knows who he is wants to piss him off.*'

'*This seems like something that it would be really easy to abuse.*'

'*I'll have to watch out for that.*'

* * * * *

"It looks like you came through the testing unscathed. I hope it wasn't too unsettling." Marsha said as she walked out of her office, carrying some papers.

"It wasn't bad. I just didn't understand the point of most of it." Paul said honestly as he stood to greet her.

"We test for several things. Most of them won't have anything to do with you, but we test just the same in the event that you might have a particular talent that we should be aware of." Marsha said, then indicated for Paul to have a seat.

Before Paul could ask for an example, Marsha continued, "I've created a new class schedule for you, based on your strengths. You'll have your academic classes and foundational magics before lunch each day. In the afternoons, you'll be in your specialty class, learning the skills and control for your primary ability."

"What's my primary ability?" Paul asked cautiously.

Marsha referred to the paperwork in her hand, then said, "You seem to have an aptitude for fire, so you'll be receiving a foundational study course in that. Once you've mastered the basics, you'll be encouraged to go into a more specialized subset."

"Oh. Okay." Paul said hesitantly.

"As often comes with fire, your specialized field of magic would seem to be based in wizardry, more specifically necromancy. It turns out that we have a rather talented group of students in that specialty this year, so you should have ample opportunities to work with others and benefit from their accumulated knowledge."

"Is it going to be a problem that I don't know what I'm doing? I mean, I didn't even know about witches a few days ago." Paul asked anxiously.

"That's actually fairly common. But at least with Mr. Darroch being your father, I know that you'll be getting the support you will need at home. Some aren't so

lucky." Marsha finished regretfully, then continued, "No matter. The teachers all understand that new students many times won't know the basics. I've even heard it expressed that some of them prefer that, since it means that the students won't have to 'unlearn' bad habits or erroneous knowledge from previous, inadequate teachings."

Paul slowly nodded that he understood what she was saying.

It actually served to put him somewhat at ease, knowing that there were other students who started out further behind than he already was.

"Since second period is nearly over, I'll have Janice walk you down at the start of third period and introduce you to your teacher. Your morning classes will be different from day to day but every afternoon you'll be attending your primary training." Marsha said pleasantly.

"What's my next class going to be?" Paul asked cautiously. He wanted to brace himself.

"Magic theory. The professor sometimes gives lectures on procedures or theories. Other times, the class will focus on the bookwork required for your afternoon class. Every student in the class will likely be studying a different thing, learning the specifics that they'll need to know for their practical application course in the afternoon."

Paul nodded dumbly, somehow both understanding and not understanding at the same time. Either way, he couldn't think clearly enough to form a coherent question.

"This actually works out quite well. You'll have the opportunity to do a little preparation before you're thrust into a lab situation where you might be expected to perform."

"Do you mean that I'm going to have to get up in front of everyone and try to do magic?"

"No. Not everyone. You'll most likely be teamed with other students with similar or complementary abilities so that you'll be able to work together and support each other. You may have to 'perform' in front of them, and your instructor, of course, but not the whole class."

"Oh. Okay. I think I can do that."

"Don't worry. If things aren't going well, just let a member of the staff know and they'll work to help you. We're all here for that singular purpose."

'*How many times have I heard someone say crap like that before?*'

'*And how many times did it turn out that they were saying it to justify the shitty job that they were doing?*'

'*They say something like 'we're here to help you', then turn a blind eye when three guys jump you on the playground and steal your money.*'

'*They watch people be horrible to each other, both teachers and students, and they don't do a thing.*'

'*Considering our first encounter, I don't have any reason to believe what Marsha is telling me...*'

'...*but for some reason I kinda do.*'

'*At least, I'm willing to give her a chance.*'

"I'll do that. Thanks." Paul stammered.

Marsha smiled at his response, then glanced at the clock before saying, "If you're ready, you can go with Janice now. She'll show you the entrance to the hidden part of the school."

Thanks to Marsha's assurance and words of encouragement, Paul was able to honestly reply, "I'm ready."

* * * * *

When Janice led Paul down the hallway, just past the cafeteria, Paul was surprised to realize that he hadn't noticed another hallway being there before.

Before Paul could formulate a question, saying as much, Janice said, "There's a ward in place which encourages those who don't already know about this wing of the school to overlook it."

"So you don't have to cast a spell directly on a person for it to work?" Paul asked curiously.

"Look here." Janice said as she walked to the entry to the hallway and pointed out an ornamental filigree pattern along the wall, so bland and beige that it was barely noticeable.

"This is where the spell has been placed. If you look carefully at the pattern of the design, you'll begin to see the disguised text of the spell. Those who approach are drawn to turn their attention elsewhere. Just knowing that it's here negates the effect."

As they continued their walk, the class bell sounded.

Within seconds, students emerged from the classrooms up and down the hall, making their way to their next classes.

"You'll be getting a double block class today before lunch, so you should have plenty of time to discover some new things that you'd like to try when you reach your practical lab setting. Just keep in mind that everyone is different. We all have our own talents and interests. You will likely be asked to learn and practice some things that don't interest you. Please accept that it's part of the learning process and that once you've learned the basics, you'll have more opportunity to pursue those things that *do* interest you." Janice said as they walked.

When they arrived at one of the classrooms, Janice knocked on the open door, then cautiously said, "Professor Ortega, I have a new student for you."

"I recently noticed that I still had one empty desk in my classroom. This must be divine providence." The professor said warmly as he covered a teapot with a quilted cover.

Despite any fear that Paul might have been harboring, the man's jovial nature served to put Paul at ease.

"It must be." Janice said with a barely restrained smile, then continued, "Professor Ortega, this is Paul Darroch. His status was just changed from regular classes."

"Does that mean that you only recently became aware of the existence of the greater world?" Professor Ortega asked Paul curiously.

"Yes, sir. About three days ago at my parents' wedding, in Scotland." Paul said uncertainly, since it seemed like it had been so much longer.

"Since you've been enrolled in my class, can I assume that you've discovered that you have a supernatural ability?" Professor Ortega asked curiously.

"Yeah. Well, you see, I kinda summoned a demon..." Paul muttered uncomfortably.

"At the wedding?" Professor Ortega guessed.

Paul reluctantly nodded.

"That must have been quite some event." Professor Ortega chuckled good naturedly.

"It was. But no one seemed to be bothered too much by it. My new cousin, Lenn, said that more marriages would probably work out if the old ex-wives and ex-girlfriends were dragged off to hell as part of the wedding ceremony." Paul said a bit anxiously.

"He might very well be right about that." Professor Ortega said with a laugh, then turned to Janice and said, "I was just about to have some tea before my next class begins. Would you care to join me?"

"No, thank you Professor. I need to get back to the office." Janice said gratefully, then turned to Paul and said, "Here are your daily class schedules. Be sure to come to the office if you have any questions or concerns."

"I will." Paul promised.

"If you will excuse me, have a good day." Janice said before hurrying away.

"We have a few minutes before the next class group will start arriving. Would you care for a cup of tea?" Professor Ortega asked as he removed the quilted cover from the teapot and began to pour a cup for himself.

Although Paul's first impulse was to refuse, mainly because he didn't particularly like hot tea, he couldn't help but feel that spending a few relaxed minutes in the professor's company might end up being a rare and valuable experience for him.

"Yes sir. I'd like that. Thank you."

* * * * *

"May I assume from your surname that you are related to Mr. Darroch, who is such a prominent figure in the community?" Professor Ortega asked as he handed a filled cup of tea to Paul.

"Yes sir. At least, now I am. He married my mom a few days ago." Paul said quietly before taking a sip of the tea.

"I can't say that I know him personally, but I've heard only favorable things about him."

"I haven't known him that long either, but from what I've seen so far, there's no one else that I'd rather have as a father."

"It's good that you get along. It's not always the case with blended families."

A group of three students walked into the room and made their way immediately to their desks.

After another sip of tea, Professor Ortega said, "As I recall, Mr. Darroch has a son about your same age, doesn't he?"

"Yes. His name is Gwayne, but everyone calls him G."

"Yes, of course. He's a close friend to some of my students. I hope that you and he get along as well."

"He's the brother that I always wanted." Paul said warmly, then noticed more students filing into the room.

"Very good. Many times students who don't have satisfying or supportive homes have trouble learning the basics of magic. Having so much turmoil in their lives

makes it difficult for them to form a solid foundation. From what you've told me, you shouldn't have any such worry."

"I grew up not knowing anything about magic or witches, so I feel like I've got a lot to learn. But as far as having people at home who support me, I think I've got that covered."

"If they will provide you the support, I will be honored to provide whatever knowledge you are lacking. It will be up to you to put these things to good use."

"I'll do that." Paul said sincerely, then noticed that more of the class had joined them.

Professor Ortega held out his hand and Paul gave him his teacup.

After setting the teacups aside, the professor said, "If you'll take a seat over there, we will begin."

* * * * *

Paul was happy to see that Nazzy and Vinda were in his class. He looked around and recognized a few other people from the lunchroom, but was disappointed to find that G wasn't among them.

The class bell sounded as Professor Ortega took his rightful place at the front of the room.

"Everyone, if I may have your attention. As you may have noticed, we have a new student amongst us this morning. It is my hope that you will share some of what you have learned so that he may participate with you on your own level."

Paul was understandably uncomfortable being the focus of so much attention, but had been through the experience enough times that he wasn't too terribly bothered by it.

Thankfully, Professor Ortega began his lecture after that and Paul settled in to listen. Most of what the professor was talking about was general and theoretical, Paul found that he was able to follow what the professor was saying reasonably well.

The professor spoke of the balance of forces and the relationship between spellcasting and the spellcaster's emotional state. Although Paul was no nearer to being able to actually cast a spell, he was at least beginning to understand some of the basic theory behind it all.

* * * * *

The class bell rang and Professor Ortega told the students to enjoy a few minutes break before returning to the lecture.

A few members of the class left, presumably to visit the restroom. However most of the students remained in the classroom and gathered into small groups to talk quietly amongst themselves.

"You made it! So, what do you think?" Nazzy asked as he and Vinda approached.

"It's great so far, but where's G?" Paul asked curiously.

"I think he's got Sorcery this period. We were in class with him earlier and he was really worried about you." Vinda said somberly.

"Yeah. It was all he could talk about." Nazzy added.

"What can you tell me about what we'll be doing after lunch? I don't know what to expect." Paul said honestly.

"That's going to be up to Professor Ortega and whatever teacher he assigns you. Most times they'll team a new person with some of the advanced students and let them work together to get him caught up." Vinda said frankly.

"Do you think that I'll get to team up with you?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Probably not. Neither one of us has any talent for demon summoning so we probably wouldn't be of much help to you. Professor Ortega will probably team you up with someone closer to your specialty." Vinda said seriously.

"Does that mean that there are other demon summoners in this class?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Nicholas." Nazzy and Vinda said in unison.

At Paul's questioning look, Nazzy explained, "There are a couple others but Nicholas has a demon imp that he keeps with him during class. Even though other students have been able to summon demons, Nicholas is the only student in our year who's been able to consistently summon and control one."

"I guess that sooner or later I'll have to do that, even though the idea of commanding or controlling someone sounds totally wrong to me." Paul said honestly.

"I doubt that Nicholas feels that way about it, but I think that most *decent* people question the ethics of how they use their magical gifts." Vinda said seriously.

"I thought demon summoners were rare. In fact, I remember G saying that he'd never met one before." Paul said slowly.

"He might not have." Nazzy said frankly, then explained, "People like us, who use the 'darker' magic, usually don't go around telling people about what we can do. I mean, when we're outside of school and we're sure that we're around people who will accept us, it's a whole different thing. But here, some of the 'fluffy bunny' types

will try to shame you for being anything that they're not. It's best not to reveal too much outside of your class group."

"Besides that, Nicholas isn't very sociable... or friendly." Vinda added with a withering look.

"Right. And with G being so happy and carefree all the time, he's kind of the opposite of Nicholas." Nazzy agreed.

"And even if they did meet, G wouldn't have any way of knowing that Nicholas is a demon summoner. Being in our class doesn't really tell anything about your ability except that it's based in Wizardry." Vinda explained.

"Yeah. As far as I know, Corabeth can't summon anything at all, but she's one of the best students in the class." Nazzy added.

"If she can't summon anything, what can she do?" Paul asked curiously.

"I know there's a word for it, but I don't remember what it is. She creates this 'wall of force' or something. It's really impressive." Nazzy said with a smile, then looked up when the class bell rang.

"I can't wait to see it." Paul said as he noticed that the others in the classroom were breaking away from their little groups.

"We'll talk more at lunch." Vinda assured him.

"Yeah." Paul responded with a smile as he watched Nazzy and Vinda return to their desks.

* * * * *

Professor Ortega's next hour of lecture had to do primarily with 'field manipulations', which Paul didn't understand in the least.

When the class bell rang, heralding lunch, Professor Ortega called for Paul to stay behind for a moment.

"Yes sir?" Paul asked as he approached, noticing that Nazzy and Vinda had stopped to wait for him by the door.

"Mr. Darroch, I just wanted to be sure to let you know that when you return from lunch, you will be working with Mr. Gilbert and he will let you know what will be expected of you during your practical class time. I will, of course, be present in the classroom, but in more of an advisory than a teaching capacity. Should you have any need of assistance, please feel free to seek me out." Professor Ortega finished with a sincere smile.

"I will. Thank you sir." Paul said respectfully.

"Go on now. You wouldn't want to keep Mr. Couleigh and Miss Sodhi waiting." Professor Ortega said warmly.

"Yes sir. Thank you again." Paul said before joining his friends at the classroom door.

* * * * *

As Paul walked out of the classroom, Vinda quietly said, "Remember that we're going to be around normal people in the cafeteria. Make sure that you don't talk about magic while we're in there."

"I don't think it'll be a problem. I don't know anything yet." Paul said honestly.

"Don't worry. You'll get there." Nazzy assured him.

"How did it go? Are you alright?"

Paul turned and smiled as he saw G approaching. "I'm fine. All I've had to do is listen so far. No one's asked me to *do* anything."

"Good. Just hang in there. I know that you're smart enough to learn everything that you need to. You just have to give yourself a chance." G said confidently.

As they turned the corner to the cafeteria, Nazzy said, "Paul is in our class group. We're going to have class together every afternoon."

"That's great! I was worried that you might get put into a class where you didn't know anyone. Having Nazzy and Vinda will help you out a lot." G said honestly as they automatically got into the serving line.

As Paul looked over the food selections he couldn't help but say, "I can't believe how you guys eat here. At my last school, the food tasted more plastic than the wrappers it came in."

"I've heard that before. But since this is the only school that I've ever been to, I don't have any way of judging for myself." Nazzy said frankly.

"So have you known about... stuff... since you started school?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. I know that some parents pretend that they're normal around their kids but mine never did that. I went to a 'special' elementary school, it's run by the same people that run this place; that's where I met G and Vinda. After elementary school, we all started going here." Nazzy said frankly.

There was a long silent moment as everyone made their lunch selections. Once they all had their trays filled, they made their way into the dining room and easily found an unoccupied table.

"Paul?" A boy's voice asked as they were all settling in.

Paul turned and had to search his memory for the name of the boy that he'd spoken to once before.

"What's up, Curtis?" Paul asked cautiously, hoping that he was remembering the boy's name correctly.

"I thought you must have moved away or something. You went to school for a few days, then all of a sudden you just stopped."

"Yeah. Well, the reason I started going to this school is because my mom met this guy who lives here and she decided to marry him. We just moved into his house. I was gone last week because their wedding was out of town."

"So you're back now? You weren't in class today." Curtis said suspiciously.

"Yeah. I was having some trouble before, so they tested me and decided to move me to another class where I might be able to do better."

"I noticed that you looked kinda lost when you were here before."

"I never *did* figure out what those *ordinal* things were that the teacher seemed to be so excited about."

"Introductions?" G asked quietly.

"Oh! I'm sorry. Curtis was in one of my classes before the wedding. Curtis, this is my new brother, G and our friends, Nazzy and Vinda." Paul said quickly.

"It's nice to meet you." Curtis said as he looked at the group, then his focus seemed to stop on G as he said, "I've seen you around at lunch, but I don't think that I've had any classes with you."

"Yeah. It's a big school." G said easily.

"Would you like to have lunch with us?" Vinda quickly offered.

"If you're all friends, I don't want to get in the way." Curtis said uneasily.

"Paul's still new to the group. Having a friend of his join us will kind of even things out." Vinda said cheerfully.

Curtis glanced at Paul and quietly asked, "Is that okay?"

"Yeah. Go on and get your food. We'll save a seat for you." Paul assured him.

"Okay." Curtis said happily, then to the whole group he said, "Thanks!"

* * * * *

"What was that all about?" Paul asked Vinda as soon as Curtis was out of earshot.

"Just what I said. We three are old friends, so I can see how you might feel outnumbered sometimes. Curtis seems nice and I thought that maybe he'd enjoy hanging out with us." Vinda explained.

"But he's not a... you know." Paul urged her to understand.

"Neither were you, at least as far as you knew, before last week and you were always welcome to sit with us. You and Curtis each have a lifetime of believing that the world works a certain way. The only difference is that you recently discovered that that was wrong." Vinda finished with a smile.

"So it's okay that he's not like us?" Paul asked as he glanced to be sure of where Curtis was in the serving line.

"It's fine. We'll just talk about normal stuff when he's around." Vinda assured him.

"While it's true that we don't have any 'normal' friends, that's not because we don't like them or don't want to associate with them. It's just because we don't really get a lot of opportunities." G said frankly.

"And we don't really have a lot in common." Nazzy quickly added.

"That's right. Just because of who and what we are, we have to grow up differently from *them*. It doesn't make us hate them or anything, but I think the differences make it more difficult for us to find common ground to get to know each other." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"I think I get it. If Curtis is my friend, then I can act kind of like a bridge for you to maybe give you enough in common so that he can become your friend too?" Paul asked speculatively.

"If it works out that way, then great. But if not, then he'll just be someone else that we can invite to sit with us at lunchtime." Nazzy finished with a smile.

"So, what are you guys talking about?" Curtis asked as he set his tray on the table.

"You." Vinda said with a grin.

"What about me?" Curtis asked warily.

"Paul was just making sure that we weren't trying to prank you or something mean like that by inviting you to sit with us." Vinda said simply.

"I hope you told him that you wouldn't do that." Curtis said cautiously.

"No. There are a few other people around here who've cornered the market on that kind of behavior. But we've only known Paul for a couple weeks, so I can understand it if he hasn't completely figured us out yet." Vinda said with an easy smile.

"Thanks for watching my back, Paul." Curtis said gratefully.

"I've got you covered." Paul assured him.

'*So... they want for me to be their friend AND have friends of my own besides them?*'

'*What kind of witchery is this?*'

'...'

'*Okay. Maybe I **do** need more friends if I'm making snarky jokes to myself.*'

* * * * *

The group ate their lunches and talked for a few minutes about general topics.

Finally it was G who said, "Curtis, I've been going to this school forever and I haven't seen you around here before. Are you new here too?"

"Well, yeah. My family moved here during the summer and heard that this 'private' school was really good, so I started here this fall." Curtis said uncomfortably.

"So when you saw Paul on his first day, you could relate to what he was going through?" Vinda asked speculatively.

"Yeah. From what I can tell, most of the people here are like you, they've been going here for years. No one seems interested in getting to know someone new." Curtis said regretfully.

"I can't speak for anyone else, but I know that when we have a new person in one of my classes, I usually don't want to get too close to them because if they moved here all of a sudden, then they're probably that much more likely to turn around and move again." G said seriously.

Paul couldn't help but nod in agreement. He had been the one moving away 'all of a sudden' for most of his life.

"I hadn't thought of that." Curtis said honestly.

"Well, you don't have to worry about Paul moving away. I think our parents are going to be together for the long haul." G said confidently.

"I wish I could say that I'll be staying, but it's not really up to me. If something happens and my dad has to relocate again then I'd have to move. I don't really get a choice in the matter." Curtis said regretfully.

"I know how it is, Curtis. I've had to move so many times that I can't count them all. And every time I'd have to move it'd be just a little bit harder to try to get to know new people and a little bit easier to let them go the next time that I moved." Paul said honestly.

"This is only the third time that we've moved, but I think the thing that makes this time worse is that I like it here. The school's nice and the food's good and if you guys really don't mind me hanging around with you... the thing is, I can't let myself enjoy it too much because it could all end at any moment." Curtis said anxiously.

"Newsflash: Life's not fair." Paul said simply.

The others around the table looked at him with surprise.

"Once you accept that, maybe you'll be able to enjoy what you have for as long as you can have it." Paul added, directing his statement mostly at Curtis.

"But what do I do if they suddenly have to move again?" Curtis asked desperately.

"I wish I could give you some advice about that, but when you have no foundation, no security, all you can really do is deal with it the best way that you can. For me, sometimes that means feeling bitter and resentful. Other times it means feeling nothing at all." Paul said frankly.

"But you're better now that you're here, aren't you?" G asked Paul cautiously.

"It's not that simple." Paul answered regretfully, then explained, "When you move from place to place, always wanting a 'real' home, eventually it becomes impossible to believe that such a thing could ever happen to you. Even though my brain knows that I have a stable home now, in the back of my mind there's this thing that's warning me not to get too comfortable, not to allow myself to get too attached."

"Yeah. That's exactly what it feels like." Curtis said quietly.

"What can I do to make you feel like you can stay here?" G asked anxiously.

"Nothing." Paul said simply.

'*Hey, you guys wanted to be my friends.*'

'*Here it is. This is the **real** me.*'

'*I don't have all the answers and certain things **do** bother me.*'

'*If you can't handle it, I need to know now.*'

Nazzy, Vinda and G looked at him with surprise as Curtis nodded his understanding.

"It's not like I have my bags packed and I'm ready to leave at a moment's notice. I've just never known what it feels like to be someplace that I could really call 'home'. Every place that I ever lived was temporary, so I don't know how I could talk myself into feeling like I've found something permanent." Paul tried to explain.

"I don't mean to disagree with you, but you actually *do* have your bags packed." G reminded him.

"Oh, yeah. That's just because we got in so late last night." Paul admitted, then added, "But I'm not planning on leaving. I'm just saying that it's not in my nature to believe that I'll be staying. My life has taught me never to believe that because I'll always be disappointed."

"It's almost time for the bell. What's your next class?" Curtis asked as he gathered everything onto his tray.

"It's a lab class. I haven't had it before, so I really don't know what to expect. But Nazzy and Vinda are in the class with me, so I'm not too worried about it." Paul finished with a smile.

"Oh. I was kind of hoping that you'd be having history next. I know we wouldn't be able to talk or anything, but maybe it would be less boring if I wasn't in there facing it alone." Curtis said honestly.

"Misery loves company?" G asked with a smile as he stood and picked up his tray.

"Yeah. I guess so." Curtis chuckled.

"Well, you may have to suffer through history class on your own, but you don't have to think of yourself as being alone. Why don't you plan on having lunch with us again tomorrow?" G asked pleasantly.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Curtis happily agreed.

"We'll see you then." G said, then carried his tray to the drop-off window. Nazzy and Vinda were soon to follow.

As Paul was standing, Curtis quietly asked, "Is it true, what I've heard about you and that guy?"

"What's that?" Paul asked as he picked up his tray.

"That you were hugging in the hallway and that he's, like, your boyfriend or something." Curtis said anxiously.

'*Oh no.*'

'*Please don't ask me any questions about being gay.*'

'*I've only been officially gay for one week.*'

'*I'm not very good at it yet.*'

"I don't see that it matters except when we're alone, but yeah, it's true." Paul said cautiously.

"I just wondered. You hear stuff and I wasn't sure." Curtis said slowly.

"Does it bother you?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. I think it's good that you two can be honest about who you are. I'm not... you know, like you. But if I was, I think that I'd like to be like you... I mean, I'd want to face it and not be ashamed and hiding it." Curtis stammered.

"I'm gay. G is my boyfriend. I've got no problem with you knowing that. And it looks to me like you've got no problem accepting it. Now that we've gotten all of that out of the way, how about we not make a big deal about it?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I just wanted to be sure so I wouldn't say the wrong thing and find out that what I thought was true really wasn't." Curtis babbled.

"Fair enough. And not everyone has the guts to just come out and ask about something like that. Thanks for doing that." Paul said sincerely before picking up his tray.

"Yeah." Curtis said with a smile as he followed.

'*That. What Curtis just did. That's what friends do.*'

'*If they want to know something, they ask you, even if it might hurt your feelings.*'

'*I wonder if G, Nazzy and Vinda realize what a good guy he is?*'

'*Is that why they invited him to join us?*'

'*Nah. They just see my friend.*'

'*And that's enough for them to include him.*'

* * * * *

Paul caught up with Nazzy and Vinda just outside the cafeteria.

"Did you two have a good talk?" Nazzy asked as they began to walk.

"Yeah. He asked if G and I were boyfriends." Paul said simply.

"Do you think he's interested in you?" Nazzy asked suddenly.

"Or G?" Vinda added curiously.

"No. I don't get that vibe from him at all. I think he just wants to understand what's going on."

"So what did you tell him?" Nazzy asked cautiously.

"The truth. Everyone whose opinion I care about already knows, so why bother trying to hide it?"

"Good point." Vinda said easily, then indicated for Paul to turn right at the next intersecting hallway.

"Any last words of advice before we go into class?" Paul asked anxiously.

"Some people are just too full of themselves. Don't let them get to you." Nazzy said frankly.

"That bad, huh?" Paul asked slowly.

"We'll just have to wait and see who you get partnered with, but yeah, it'll probably suck." Nazzy regretfully informed him.

Paul nodded that he had heard as they walked into a large central room.

* * * * *

As Paul walked into the oversized meeting room, he could feel the stares of everyone on him.

The students seemed to have formed into small groups, talking quietly amongst themselves.

"Professor Ortega is probably meeting with the teachers. They're usually a few minutes late." Nazzy said quietly.

"Don't we have any desks or anything?" Paul asked curiously.

"We have tables in our work rooms." Vinda explained as she pointed toward a series of closed doors.

"We usually meet out here for a few minutes, then break into groups to do our work." Nazzy added.

Before Paul could think of a response, Professor Ortega led a group of teachers into the room.

"Today while you're doing your exercises, I'm going to ask that you keep in mind how you're balancing the forces at play. Your instructors are going to be paying particular attention and offering their advice." Professor Ortega said to the entire room.

Paul noticed that everyone had silenced and were paying him their full attention.

"Mr. Gilbert, Mr. Spencer, Miss Watson and Mr. Darroch, if you'll stay behind with me everyone else can begin their practice exercises." Professor Ortega said firmly.

"Don't worry. You'll be fine." Nazzy said quietly, then gave Paul's shoulder a firm squeeze as he passed by.

Paul was actually surprised at how comforting Nazzy's words, actions and general attitude were to him.

It took a moment for him to get his mind back on track, but when he did, he cautiously made his way to the front of the room as everyone else seemed to be scattering in different directions.

"Mr. Darroch, may I present Mr. Gilbert. He will be your instructor while you're in my class." Professor Ortega said as he indicated a thirtyish man at his side.

"It's nice to meet you." Paul said timidly, even though it wasn't *entirely* true.

"A pleasure for me as well. Would you prefer that I address you as Mr. Darroch?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"No, thank you. Paul will be fine."

"Very well, Paul. Have you had any formal training before this?"

"No. I didn't even know about magic before last week."

"Has anyone warned you about the powers that you will be accessing?"

"No. No one's said much of anything about it."

"You will be opening doorways, which will be your responsibility to close. You will also be drawing beings onto our plane of existence and you will be responsible for the consequences of that."

"If it's so dangerous, then why teach me?"

"Because it's far more dangerous for you to have the power to do such things without training in how to use it responsibly." Mr. Gilbert said frankly, then continued, "These two are going to be your teammates, Nicholas and Amelia."

Paul turned to see two of his classmates looking back at him. Before he could say anything, Mr. Gilbert continued, "I will need your help to get Paul up to speed."

"Shouldn't he be placed with someone nearer his own level?" Nicholas asked derisively.

'*What a dick!*'

"Perhaps Professor Ortega is trying to determine if what you have is really an exceptional understanding of the material or if your ability to summon is a fluke." Mr. Gilbert said simply.

"Can I summon Frederick now?" Nicholas asked coldly.

"Yes. I think that Mr. Darroch might benefit from a demonstration." Mr. Gilbert said as he gestured toward one of the doorways surrounding the room.

Nicholas gave a huff of exasperation, then stalked away at a deliberate pace, leaving the rest of the group behind.

"Amelia has demonstrated an aptitude for a variety of the disciplines of Wizardry. I believe that she will be a valuable resource for you to draw upon." Mr. Gilbert said as the group followed Nicholas more slowly.

"Don't expect me to do your work for you." Amelia said bitterly.

'*I don't care if she's a girl. She's a dick too!*'

"I won't." Paul said slowly, not understanding her immediate animosity toward him.

* * * * *

By the time Paul had entered the study room, Nicholas already had a metal cabinet open and had placed candles around a diagram on the floor. He was currently drawing symbols around the diagram with chalk.

"Can you light the candles?" Amelia asked Paul as she broke away from the group and walked to another metal cabinet.

"Sure. Where are the matches?" Paul asked as he looked around.

Amelia rolled her eyes at him before opening the second cabinet.

"I believe that Amelia was asking if you had the knowledge and precision to magically light candles." Mr. Gilbert explained.

"No. I haven't learned anything about magic." Paul said honestly.

"According to what Professor Ortega told me, you have the aptitude for fire, so it shouldn't take long for you to learn the skill."

"What do I have to do?"

"While Nicholas is preparing, I'll show you the proper form. Once you've learned that, I'll give you the incantation." Mr. Gilbert said then demonstrated a hand gesture which resulted in a small flame appearing in his palm.

Paul tried to duplicate the movement, but found that it wasn't as easy as it looked.

"Watch me, I'll show you the individual movements more slowly." Mr. Gilbert said patiently.

This time, Paul was able to mimic the movements exactly.

"The next part is what might take some time. I'm going to say the incantation aloud, and you can repeat after me. Once you've mastered the skill, you should be able to say the incantation in your inner voice, so all that anyone will see is the gesture. In time, you may reach a level of proficiency where the gesture becomes unnecessary."

"Inner voice?" Paul asked slowly.

"Yes. I can't speculate on what it's like to be a mundane person, but among witches it's not uncommon to have an inner voice that we can use to internally incant a spell." Mr. Gilbert explained.

"How do you make a flame appear on a candle instead of in your hand? Do you change the incantation or gesture or is there something else?" Paul asked curiously.

"That's a very intelligent question which leads us to the third part of the lesson. If all it took to cast a spell were words and actions, then a mundane person would be able to do it. The third component is your magical *will*."

'*Oh, that's right. Dr. Williams was saying something about that.*'

"When you use your inherent magic, you offer up a piece of your personal magical energy to fuel the spell. Some call it your spirit or soul, others look upon it as an ectoplasmic reservoir that you can tap into. When you perform the gesture and say the words, at the same time you will be directing your *will* to make the desired result happen. If you're focused on your objective, you will get the result that you want. If not... notice that we have a plentiful supply of fire extinguishers around the room." Mr. Gilbert said as he gestured toward a few of them.

"Dr. Williams said something about being in the right state of mind when you're using magic; that certain types of magic require different moods or attitudes. At least, that's how I understood it."

"Yes. Although that theory isn't universally accepted, my own experience would seem to bear it out."

"What kind of attitude should I have?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Fire tends to be fueled by your passion. Being tired, bored or indifferent will negatively impact your spellcasting. If you're enthusiastic, you'll have a greater chance for success."

"Since this is all new to me, I don't think that a lack of enthusiasm will be a problem."

"I agree. You appear to have more than enough for this situation."

"Let me see if I've got this right." Paul said, then performed the hand gesture.

After watching, Mr. Gilbert said, "Yes. That should produce the desired result."

"Okay, what are the words?" Paul asked hopefully.

Mr. Gilbert said a short phrase which sounded somewhat poetic in its cadence. It was in an ancient language that Paul couldn't identify from the tone and inflection of the words, but within him there was a recognition. Although his ears heard the strange foreign language, Paul's mind registered the meanings beneath the words.

Paul began to make the gesture with his right hand as he said aloud, "I summon flame. Do no harm. Be here, not there. It is by the power of my will. I command it to be so."

Before Mr. Gilbert could react to Paul's translation of the spell, a small ball of flame appeared in Paul's open palm.

"Are you sure that you've never had any training in spellcasting before?" Mr. Gilbert asked in surprise.

"No. Never." Paul confirmed, then nervously asked, "How do I make it stop?"

"The flame in your hand is created entirely by your will. Withdraw your will for it to be so and it will extinguish." Mr. Gilbert said calmly.

It took a moment for Paul to trace the tendril of his internal power lending itself to the external manifestation, but once he identified it, he was easily able to stop the flow. He watched with a smile of accomplishment as his little ball of flame simply ceased to be.

"Mr. Gilbert, we're ready." Nicholas interrupted.

"Allow me a moment to verify your diagram, then I'd like for Paul to try to light the candles." Mr. Gilbert said decisively.

"Do you really have to check the diagram *every single time* I do it?" Nicholas whined.

"Yes. I do." Mr. Gilbert said firmly, then explained, "What you're doing is dangerous and regardless of how highly you think of yourself, you *are* capable of making mistakes. It is my responsibility to act as a safeguard."

Nicholas snorted derisively, then muttered, "Whatever."

After a moment of looking over the diagram, Mr. Gilbert turned to Paul and asked, "Will you try to light the candles?"

"Sure." Paul said, then looked around at each of the candles surrounding the seven pointed diagram before internally saying the words of the spell.

'*I summon flame.*

Do no harm.

Be here, not there.

It is by the power of my will.

I command it to be so."

All seven candles lit simultaneously.

The teacher and two other students looked on in awe at Paul's achievement.

"You didn't speak the words or do the gestures." Mr. Gilbert said slowly.

"I decided to try doing it like you said and did them in my head." Paul said simply, then cautiously asked, "That was alright, wasn't it?"

"That was *exceptional*!" Mr. Gilbert enthusiastically assured him.

"Can I summon Frederick now?" Nicholas asked belligerently.

"Yes. Go ahead." Mr. Gilbert said as he guided Paul to take a few steps back.

Chapter 2

The first thing to catch Paul's attention was that the deeper Nicholas got into his spellcasting, the bluer his skin tone seemed to become. There were also some minor ridges formed framing Nicholas' face, like the first buds of slowly emerging horns, but they weren't enough to obfuscate his identity.

Paul was mostly able to follow along with the spell that Nicholas was casting on the diagram drawn on the floor. There were a few misspoken words and one entire passage that was self-contradictory and therefore completely useless. But in the end, Nicholas was able to set his power free on the diagram and a small opening seemed to appear in the floor, although Paul could sense that it wasn't a hole in the floor so much as a hole in reality.

As soon as the hole was open, Nicholas began chanting an entirely different spell which was harder for Paul to understand. The language wasn't a problem so much as the convoluted grammar and strange inflections that Nicholas used. Paul could tell that he was 'summoning' something, but the details of what he was seeking were vague, at best.

Finally, after some minutes of Nicholas repeating his demand for whatever it was 'to come forth and serve his will', a small reptilian creature emerged from the hole in the center of the diagram.

The little creature might be a foot tall, if fully standing, but it tended to stay in a crouched position, hissing and spitting. It's tiny horns, teeth and claws looked as though they might be dangerous, although not necessarily deadly.

A part of Paul looked upon the demon imp with disgust, which held a desire to just stomp on the putrid little thing and be done with it. Another part looked on warily, reluctantly waiting to see what was going to happen next.

"This is Frederick, my servant." Nicholas announced to Paul triumphantly.

"Amelia, now that Nicholas has opened the doorway, would you like to work on it for a while?" Mr. Gilbert asked seriously.

Rather than answer, she sprang into action, reading an incantation aloud from a book.

"What's she going to do?" Paul asked curiously.

"For the past week or so, Amelia has been trying to determine *exactly* what realm Frederick comes from. Being able to trace an open doorway to it's source can be a valuable skill." Mr. Gilbert explained.

"Can't you just decypher the spell and find out that way?"

"In many cases you can, but the spell that Nicholas uses is written in such a way that it doesn't give specific coordinates or any real clue as to where it's being directed. Besides, since you aren't always present to witness a doorway being opened, this is a good skill to develop." Mr. Gilbert said as he watched her work.

"Yeah. I noticed that when Nicholas was opening the passage, that he said things like 'Realm of Dark Desire' and 'Cavern of Fetid Fear'. If you don't already know where he's talking about, it doesn't really tell you much."

"I'd like to get you tested for your language comprehension. So far you've demonstrated an understanding of Sumerian and Gaelic."

"Is there some use for that?" Paul asked curiously.

"Actually, that's not a subject that I'm well versed in. I imagine that there are probably some lucrative job possibilities. I'll do some investigation and get back with you on that."

"Thank you. All of this is so new to me, it's all I can do to deal with what's in front of me. I haven't even thought about what I'm going to do *years* from now."

"In just a few minutes you've demonstrated a great aptitude for spellcasting and an understanding of ancient and dead languages. I believe that the future will be what you decide to make of it." Mr. Gilbert said honestly.

"Well, maybe. But I'm going to need help to get caught up to everyone else. A lot of the people that I've talked to have known about witches all their lives. I don't even know the basics."

"With the talents that you've already demonstrated, I feel confident in saying that you'll be able to catch up faster than you might imagine possible."

Paul glanced at Amelia, sitting cross-legged in front of Nicholas' spell diagram, and did a classic double-take. The rather average looking girl that had entered the room with them was now bright yellow in color and seemed to have grown a few extra arms.

"Does everyone transform when they use their magic?" Paul asked in wonder as he stared at her.

"Most, yes. Although, with some practice, you can usually resist the change. In Amelia's case, I think that it's more a matter of her not wanting to be distracted by resisting the transformation so that she can completely focus on her scrying."

Paul looked carefully at Amelia, something niggling at the back of his mind. While it was true that she had six arms and her skin was now buttercup yellow, none of that seemed to bother him.

It took a moment for him to realize what else was out of place.

"Her clothes changed." Paul finally said in realization.

"Yes. It's a basic spell that causes clothing to adapt to your magical form." Mr. Gilbert said simply.

"Can you teach it to me?" Paul asked hopefully, then explained, "Everytime I change I have to undress to keep from ruining my clothes."

"Yes. Of course. Give me a minute and I'll find a written version of the spell for you." Mr. Gilbert said as he stepped away.

Paul looked toward Nicholas and saw him talking to his little demonic imp.

Amelia seemed to be deep in concentration, totally focused on the misty vortex in the center of the spell diagram.

* * * * *

When Mr. Gilbert returned, he took a moment to turn to the proper page, then handed a book to Paul.

"This describes the spell gestures and gives you the incantation. Most witches can use this spell, but if for some reason you aren't able to, it's also possible to make a charm that you can wear to achieve the same result." Mr. Gilbert said seriously.

"Thanks." Paul said as he began to read the spell.

"Have you tried to use any basic magic yet?" Mr. Gilbert asked curiously.

"No. I haven't *intentionally* used any magic at all, so far. The most I've done is change into my magical form when someone asked me to." Paul said absently as he continued to read.

"Most people want to try things out as soon as they discover that magic is real." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

"This time yesterday I was on a plane, crossing the Atlantic ocean. I just haven't had the chance." Paul said honestly.

"Well, if you want, you can try this spell out now to see if you have an aptitude for it." Mr. Gilbert said slowly.

"Yeah. I really want to learn this one." Paul said decisively, then looked to Mr. Gilbert and slowly asked, "But can you read the words of the spell aloud for me? I think that if I can hear it that I'll be able to remember it a lot better than if I read it."

"Yes. Of course. Just let me know when you're ready." Mr. Gilbert said quietly.

"Let me try the gesture first." Paul said as he returned the book.

Mr. Gilbert watched as Paul performed the gesture.

"That should work." Mr. Gilbert said with a nod.

"Okay. Then can you tell me the words?"

Mr. Gilbert carefully recited the spell, making sure to enunciate every word precisely.

Paul slowly nodded, then made the gesture as he recited the English translation of the ancient spell in his mind.

After a moment, Paul looked down at himself, then quietly asked, "Did it work?"

"The only way to know for sure is if you change."

"But if it doesn't work, then my clothes will be torn up." Paul said anxiously.

"I know a few spells that can deal with that. Go ahead and change. If your clothes are damaged in the process, just change back to your human form and I'll do my best to restore them." Mr. Gilbert assured him.

"Okay." Paul said reluctantly, then gave the internal push to begin to change himself.

"Good. It seems to be working." Mr. Gilbert quietly encouraged.

Paul could feel himself growing taller and his different physical attributes forcing their way into being.

"What are you doing?" Nicholas gasped from across the room.

"This is my magical form." Paul answered as he felt his transformation concluding. As expected, his voice was octaves lower than his 'normal' voice.

"Come back here!" Nicholas barked as Frederick broke away from him and scrambled in Paul's direction.

When the little imp finally reached Paul, it climbed up one of his hooves and hugged his ankle.

"Don't worry, he's not hurting anything." Paul said as he reached down with one of his clawed hands and plucked the demonic imp from his leg.

"He's MINE! Give him back!" Nicholas demanded.

"Take it easy on him. He's probably just scared being around people who are so different from him." Paul said as he held the tiny imp to his chest and petted it gently.

"If you want a demon, summon your own! This one's mine!" Nicholas snarled as he tried to snatch the demon imp from Paul's arms.

"Back off!" Paul bellowed in his booming voice as vortices erupted in flame around the room.

"Paul! You need to stop! You're opening doorways!" Mr. Gilbert shouted.

"Back. Off." Paul said in a lower voice as he looked directly at Nicholas.

After an indecisive moment, Nicholas finally took a step back.

Paul looked around the room and all the flaming vortices immediately vanished.

He looked down at the demon imp in his arms and quietly said, "I'm here if you need me. But for now, you have to return to the one who summoned you. Those are the rules."

The imp gave an agonized little whine in response.

"I know. I know." Paul chuckled, then took the imp from his chest and held it out to Nicholas.

After a long distrusting moment, Nicholas accepted it from him.

"Is everything alright now, or do we still have a problem?" Paul asked Nicholas seriously.

"No problem." Nicholas responded warily.

Paul looked down at himself, then at Mr. Gilbert and said, "It looks like the spell worked, except that I think that Frederick peed on me."

Mr. Gilbert seemed to be dazed, but finally responded, "Change back and I'll see what I can do about it."

Without betraying the slightest effort, Paul changed from his demon form back to looking fully human.

"What are you?" Mr. Gilbert asked suspiciously.

"Can't you guess?" Paul asked in return.

After a long silent moment, Mr. Gilbert irritably said, "They should have told me that I'd be teaching a cambion."

"Is it a problem?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. Of course not. I just might have approached things differently if I had known in advance."

"Can we do something about this demon pee? It really stinks." Paul asked hopefully.

"Yes. It will take me a moment to find the proper spell. I think it was his way of marking you, so there is likely a mystical component at play. It might take a bit

more than soap and water to be completely rid of it." Mr. Gilbert said before hurrying away.

* * * * *

"You're a cambion?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But if you have any questions about that, I probably can't answer them. I only found out a few days ago." Paul said honestly.

"From what I've read, demons don't use spell books. They have an instinctive knowledge of magic." Nicholas said in a leading tone.

"I have no idea about that." Paul said honestly.

"But if you have that, I mean, inside you, then maybe there's a way to use that to find out how to navigate the portals and pull up demons from different realms." Nicholas urged him to understand.

"Again, I have no idea." Paul repeated.

"But would you be willing to try something like that?" Nicholas asked hopefully.

"Maybe. It depends on what you're asking me to do." Paul said cautiously.

"Frederick is the only demon that I've been able to summon. With your help, we might be able to tap into a realm that hasn't been touched before."

"Nicholas, before I say 'yes', would you do me a little favor?" Paul asked hopefully.

"What?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"Would you try treating Frederick like your teammate instead of like your slave?"

"What's the difference?"

Paul looked to Amelia for her support.

"Trust me. He *doesn't* know." She confirmed.

Paul looked back to Nicholas and said, "Try looking at it this way. Asking is just polite demanding. You can still control your demon without looking like a complete dick while you're doing it."

"Are you ready?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously as he returned.

"Yeah. This really stinks."

* * * * *

When Mr. Gilbert finished casting his spell, Paul wasn't sure if it had worked or not. Although there was no sign of a stain on his shirt, Paul continued to be plagued by the aroma.

"Nicholas, you've repeatedly demonstrated your ability to summon and control Frederick but for the remainder of our class time, I'd like for you to work on summoning *another* demon. Something just a little bit bigger."

"I've summoned a demon and sent it back. Isn't that enough to get me a passing grade?" Nicholas asked angrily.

"Actually, no. It isn't." Mr. Gilbert said frankly, then continued, "In this class, you're graded on your *improvement* more than your achievement."

"That's not fair!" Nicholas whined.

"Sometimes life isn't. But if you think about it, this makes sense. Rather than graduating groups of students who've managed to achieve the minimum requirement, we graduate students who have been encouraged to do their best and challenge their limits, over and over again." Mr. Gilbert said reasonably.

"Do you mean that Paul is going to get a better grade than me even though he can't summon anything?"

"If the grades were being finalized today, he might very well surpass you. He may not have cast many spells, but so far, all of the ones that he *has* attempted, have been performed flawlessly and each has been of increasing difficulty." Mr. Gilbert said calmly.

"This sucks!" Nicholas declared.

"Perhaps, but it is still a requirement of the class." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

Nicholas gave one last, rather impressive, sneer before stomping away like a petulant child.

"What now?" Paul asked cautiously.

Mr. Gilbert opened the spellbook that he was still holding, then leafed through to a particular page.

"This is a basic spell that falls both into the 'basic' and 'fire' magical categories, so it should be within your ability. It's a standard spell for wizard light. I'd like for you to read this through and then attempt the spell on your own. Modify the spell if you wish and come to me when you've reached a place where you're happy with the result that you've been able to achieve." Mr. Gilbert said seriously.

"I thought you were going to jump on me about opening doorways or acting threatening toward Nicholas or something." Paul said honestly.

"Demons follow the rule of dominance or submission. It's all they understand. Those who are learning the craft must also understand this. Today, within the first hours of meeting your classmates, you have established your dominance over them. I

believe that it was a necessary development that will allow us to proceed productively."

"So you're not mad?" Paul asked to be sure.

"No." Mr. Gilbert said simply, then added, "Although I wouldn't have planned for things to develop in this way, it may end up being beneficial for all involved."

Paul looked at him inquisitively, silently prompting for more of an explanation.

"Study your light spell. If you're not finished with it before the end of class, make sure to show me what progress you've been able to make with it. I believe that I will be spending the majority of my time trying to guide Nicholas in a more productive direction."

Paul couldn't restrain a smile as he quietly said, "Good luck with that."

Mr. Gilbert gave an almost imperceptible nod before crossing the room.

* * * * *

Paul carefully read through the spell and sounded out the incantation before attempting to cast it for real.

The manifestation of the spell was to create a little floating dot of light, which could be adjusted to be barely visible or bright enough to light one's path at night.

After successfully manifesting the Wizard's Light, Paul began to leaf through the book that Mr. Gilbert had given him, in an effort to find a way to modify the spell to make it his own.

Near the back of the book he came across a spell that caught his interest.

'*Am I just a glutton for punishment?*'

'*When will I ever learn my lesson?*'

'*When I really try and do my best work, it always comes back to bite me on the ass.*'

'*As the saying goes, 'No good deed goes unpunished'.*'

'*If I were smart at all, I'd just magic up a little wizard light and get the passing grade.*'

'*I'm new here. No one's expecting anything more from me.*'

'*And if I hold myself back, they never will.*'

'*They'll never expect anything from me but the bare minimum.*'

'*I can live with that...*'

'*...can't I?*'

'*...*'

'*I'm such an idiot dumbass loser.*'

'*I guess that I'm just incapable of learning from my mistakes.*'

'*I wonder if Nicholas and Amelia are secretly a jock and a cheerleader.*'

'*It wouldn't surprise me. My life is littered with such ironies.*'

'*Well, I guess if I'm going to do this, despite knowing better, that I'm going to pull out all the stops!*'

With renewed dedication, Paul enthusiastically began trying different things to see if his plans were even possible.

* * * * *

After trying a few different methods of altering the initial spell, Paul was convinced that his idea could work. The only problem was that he didn't have the knowledge that he needed to perform the entire spell on his own.

He would need help.

Mr. Gilbert spent a great deal of time working with Nicholas, apparently trying to inspire him to attempt more advanced projects.

Paul busied himself and was nearly ready to abandon his plan when Mr. Gilbert finally finished 'encouraging' Nicholas and left the room.

"Nicholas, I need your help." Paul said as he rushed to where Nicholas and Frederick were.

"Why should I do *anything* to help you?" Nicholas sneered.

"Hear me out. If this works, it might help you too."

"I don't like you." Nicholas said bluntly.

"I don't care." Paul said simply, then added, "But if we can pull this off, it will end up being a good thing."

"What do you want from me?" Nicholas asked warily.

Paul held out the spell book, opened to the proper page.

After a moment of reading, Nicholas said, "I can't do this diagram. It's 'next level' stuff using symbols that I've never studied." Nicholas said frankly.

"What about the incantation? Can you handle that part?"

"I'd have to go through it a few times to be sure, but I think I could probably manage it." Nicholas said slowly as he read through the details of the spell.

"So, what do you think? If I can make the diagram and you can do the incantation, do you think that we could summon a demon?" Paul asked hopefully.

"There's also a big blank in the summoning equation. Nothing's going to happen if we try to cast the spell without a locus. We're going to need that filled in if we're going to have any chance of this working."

"I think I've got that covered." Paul assured him.

There was a long silent moment as Nicholas considered his options.

"If this works, it'll make you look good and might even get Mr. Gilbert off your back for a while. If it goes wrong, it's all on me. You really can't lose." Paul explained.

Finally Nicholas grudgingly said, "Yeah. I guess we can try it."

"Good. You can keep the book and study your part. I need to double check a few things so that I'll be able to pull it all together when I need to." Paul said determinedly.

"I still don't like you."

"I still don't care." Paul responded with a smile before hurrying away.

* * * * *

Paul was careful to hide his progress from Mr. Gilbert. He manifested a few wizard lights when he had to, just to confirm that they would do what he was expecting, but for the most part, he did most of his work internally.

Much to Paul's surprise, about twenty minutes before the final bell was to sound, Professor Ortega walked into the room.

After walking around and looking at what Amelia and Nicholas were doing, he stopped beside Paul and said, "Mr. Gilbert has mentioned that he's impressed with the progress that you've made on your first day. Would you, perhaps, like to avail yourself of the opportunity to demonstrate what you've been able to accomplish thus far?"

"Yes sir. But to show you I'm going to need Nicholas' help." Paul said uncomfortably.

In a louder voice, to be heard across the room, Professor Ortega asked, "Mr. Spencer, would you be willing to assist Mr. Darroch with his demonstration?"

"Yes sir." Nicholas said as he stood, then perched Frederick on his shoulder.

"Why would you need help to demonstrate wizard lights?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"Hold on for a minute and you'll see." Paul assured him, then waited for Nicholas to cross the room.

"You said that you were going to do the diagram." Nicholas said as he approached.

"Yeah. I am. Stand back a little. I'm going to do it right here." Paul said as he pointed at the floor in front of him.

Once everyone was out of the way, Paul began an intense internal chant. The original spell was a simple one, but the way that he modified it made it more complex by an order of magnitude.

As small specks of light started forming on the floor, Paul extended his arms and began to make the gestures of the fire spell with both hands.

In unison, seven balls of fire came into being at the seven points of the diagram that was taking form on the floor.

"What are you..." Mr. Gilbert began to ask when Professor Ortega shushed him.

Paul looked over his fully formed diagram glowing on the floor one last time, making a conscious effort to seal any breaches in the binding circle that surrounded it.

"Nicholas, it's your turn." Paul said with effort, betraying the amount of concentration that he was using to maintain the diagram.

Although Paul was completely focused on his magic, he was still able to notice that Nicholas was reciting his incantation without reading it from the book. Once again, Nicholas appeared to be turning blue, but since Paul had determined that that was Nicholas' magical form, he wasn't concerned by it.

Paul listened carefully, hoping beyond hope that Nicholas wouldn't mispronounce or otherwise butcher the spell.

By this time, Amelia had joined them and was looking on in wonder at the glowing spell diagram. Paul wasn't sure if she were using her own power to try and divine what they were doing, but he didn't sense her presence making any difference in the balance of forces at work.

After long minutes of calling out the incantation in a long dead language, Nicholas switched to English and said, "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. Come without odor and be bound by my word. I hereby summon! I hereby command! Come forth!"

There was a long moment of silence in the room as everyone watched and waited for something to happen. Although nothing appeared visually before them at first, Paul could sense the boiling and swirling powers at work. He didn't know if the others could sense it or not, but everyone remained still and silent.

Finally, a gray blur appeared just above the spell diagram.

Paul watched intently as a mostly humanoid demonic being took shape. It 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.

In actuality, the demon was only three feet tall, at most. But the fierce look it wore made Paul feel that it was plenty big enough.

"What is your name?" Nicholas asked firmly.

The demon made a gargling sound of defiance.

"Your master commands it! Tell me your name!" Nicholas demanded.

"Xaphan." The demon grudgingly hissed with disgust then held up his oversized hands. Before Paul could determine if the gesture were one of surrender or attack, the fingertips of each hand burst into flame.

"As I release you to return to your realm, know that I am still your master and you are subject to my command. When I call upon you, when I call your name, you are commanded to return." Nicholas nearly shouted and Paul noticed that Nicholas had rivulets of sweat running down his blue skinned face.

After a long tense moment, Xaphan finally said, "I come."

"I return you to your plane, to your realm, to continue as you will." Nicholas ground out in a hoarse voice.

After hearing those words, the demon dissolved back into a gray blur before disappearing completely.

"What has been opened, I now close. What has been closed, I now seal." Nicholas said as he held out his open palms to the glowing spell diagram.

Paul could sense that what Nicholas had said was actually invoked. The passage that had been created between realms was now bound by new magic.

Once he was sure that Nicholas wasn't going to do anything more, Paul withdrew his power from the flames and wizard lights, causing the spell diagram to fade into nothingness.

"That was..." Mr. Gilbert began to say, but didn't seem to be able to find the words to express what he was feeling.

"You have both done very well." Professor Ortega said simply.

Paul was surprised that such a simple, innocuous comment sounded like the highest praise ringing in his ears.

"I would like for both of you to submit reports to me detailing what you've accomplished here today. Remember to include the spells used, modifications made and cite any reference materials you might have accessed." Professor Ortega said calmly.

"Do you mean that after we were able to get a spell as hard as that one to work you're going to punish us by making us write reports?" Nicholas whined.

"You misunderstand, Mr. Spencer. What I am saying is that your achievement is of such merit that I would like to see that it is properly documented, so that others who are less talented might be able to look upon your work and be inspired by it." Professor Ortega said to Nicholas, then turned to Paul and continued, "And so that new students might know what may be achieved with the most basic spells combined with a little ingenuity."

"Yes sir." Paul said as he tried to restrain his smile of pride.

"Good afternoon." Professor Ortega said calmly to the group, then withdrew from the room.

* * * * *

"How were you able to create a spell diagram using only wizard lights?" Mr. Gilbert asked slowly.

"I just did what you said and modified the spell that you gave me to work with."

"Yes. But the amount of detail that you incorporated was astounding."

"I just copied the diagram from the back of the book. The hard part was getting the wizard lights to stretch and warp the way that I wanted them to."

"But if you were able to do all of that, why did you need Nicholas to help you?" Amelia asked timidly.

"Because he knows what he's doing. I don't have any experience summoning. Drawing the diagram was the easy part. Any non-magical person could do that with a piece of chalk, but what Nicholas did took skill. If I tried to do it all myself, the *best*that I could hope for would be that the spell would totally fail. I can't even imagine the worst." Paul said honestly.

"So, am I off the hook now?" Nicholas asked Mr. Gilbert seriously.

"How's that?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"You've been hounding me about trying bigger and better spells. Now that I've done one, will you back off?"

"Although an argument could be made that you didn't achieve this entirely on your own, I'm willing to accept your successful summoning as evidence of your academic

progress. In other words, I'll back off for a week or two, but if you don't take steps to best today's performance within that time, I may be inclined to remind you that you are expected to *progress* in your training."

"Well, it's not as good as getting a free pass, but I'll take what I can get." Nicholas grumbled.

"Paul, your spell diagram was really amazing. Can you show me how you did it?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"It would probably take a lot to explain that. Since I'm going to have to write a report about it anyway, how about I email you a copy when I'm finished? That way you can just ask about whatever I didn't explain well enough."

"Yeah. That sounds good. From the way your spell diagram worked, I think that I'd like to have a written copy to refer back to."

"Amelia, were you able to make any progress on your scrying today?" Mr. Gilbert asked curiously.

"Yes. I didn't trace the portal all the way back to Frederick's realm of origin, but I was able to map another venule before my scrying spell got dislodged. One minute I'm following the portal, the next I'm looking at Camden, New Jersey."

"That often happens when scrying for locations in the bowels of hell. I'm not quite sure why that is." Mr. Gilbert finished absently.

"Anyway, I made good progress today, so I'm ready to try again tomorrow if you want me to keep going." Amelia said eagerly.

"Yes. I believe that this project of yours is well worth the time."

"Is it okay for me to close the portal now?" Nicholas asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I've done all that I can for one day." Amelia confirmed.

Nicholas walked to the spell diagram drawn on the floor, then took Frederick down off his shoulder.

"Frederick, return to your realm. I command it." Nicholas said firmly.

The little demon paused to look at Paul for a moment, then continued on to the center of the heptagram. There seemed to be the slightest blur surrounding Frederick, then the spell diagram was empty, looking mundane and harmless on the floor.

"What has been opened, I now close." Nicholas said as he made a simple gesture.

"The final bell will be ringing soon. Make sure to clear your diagram so that other students won't be tempted to try and reopen your portal." Mr. Gilbert said seriously.

Nicholas and Amelia sprang into action, stowing the candles and other pieces of gear in the cabinets along the wall.

As they did so, Mr. Gilbert approached Paul and asked, "I'm curious to know, how were you able to remain in your human form throughout your rather impressive spellcasting?"

"I don't know. I guess it's because I didn't really use all that much magic. I made a few wizard lights and tiny little fireballs. The biggest thing I did was figure out how to make the spell diagram turn out right." Paul said honestly.

"So you used your organizational skills coupled with intense visualization to achieve a result that is likely beyond the ability of most of your peers." Mr. Gilbert said speculatively.

"I just did what you told me to." Paul said frankly.

"I might be more worried about that if you hadn't exhibited such good judgement in requesting Nicholas' help. Sometimes the greater feat isn't knowing *how* to use magic, but *when*."

"Shouldn't I be helping them to clean up?" Paul asked uncomfortably as he watched his classmates, hard at work.

"They have established something of a routine. Although I'm sure that they would appreciate the offer, it's most likely that you would end up being in their way, making their clean-up effort take that much longer."

Paul nodded his understanding and acceptance of the assessment of the situation.

"I'm sure that in a short time that you will have your own equipment to store when class is coming to a close." Mr. Gilbert assured him.

Paul glanced at the third cabinet in a row and realized that when he had his own equipment, that it would be his.

"I'm not sure if anyone has told you, but on Fridays we typically set aside a portion of our class time to allow the students to demonstrate what they've been able to accomplish in the course of a week; a chance to 'show off', for lack of a better term." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

"No. No one's mentioned it." Paul said slowly.

"It's completely voluntary, and to be honest, quite entertaining. The students in this class are specialized in a variety of disciplines which makes for an interesting production. You should consider demonstrating the unique variation of Wizard Lights that you've come up with. I'm sure that everyone else would be interested to see it." Mr. Gilbert said enthusiastically.

Before he agreed to anything, Paul thought to ask, "Do Nicholas and Amelia usually do anything on Fridays?"

"Amelia's skills don't lend themselves well to demonstration. Nicholas... well... he's kind of..."

"Yeah. I noticed." Paul assured him.

"While Nicholas is only too happy to show off Frederick at the meeting, he adamantly refuses to do an actual summoning in front of others." Mr. Gilbert explained, then hurriedly added, "But your method of creating a spell diagram doesn't depend on Nicholas using it. It's an achievement in its own right."

"I'll think about it. Okay?" Paul cautiously asked.

"That's all I'm asking." Mr. Gilbert said with satisfaction.

* * * * *

After their talk, Mr. Gilbert stepped out of the room while Paul watched Amelia and Nicholas store the last few stray items.

When they were done, Paul noticed that Nicholas was looking at him speculatively.

"So, do you like me yet?" Paul asked with an irritating grin.

"No!" Nicholas immediately responded, sounding offended by the suggestion.

"Good. Otherwise things might get weird between us."

"I still don't like you but... thanks for what you said about me having, like, experience and skills and stuff. I mean, thanks for saying it to Mr. Gilbert. He doesn't seem to understand that summoning and controlling a demon isn't easy, it's not *fun*. Him pushing me and riding me to work harder and do more doesn't do anything but make me want to give up and stop doing it at all. No matter what I do, he just wants more and more. He keeps moving the goalpost. It's never enough." Nicholas finished irritably.

Paul was astonished by the admission. What Nicholas said struck a chord within him. He had experienced the same feeling several times in his life, in relation to a variety of different subjects.

After a moment to consider, Paul hesitantly said, "It may not be *enough*, but what you did today seemed to be *enough for now*. You summoned a 'Yan-gant-y-tan'. That's a big deal, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I guess so." Nicholas grudgingly admitted, then continued, "As far as I know, no one else in our year has been able to summon anything that big... or summon the same thing twice."

"So you're a rock star." Paul said with a grin.

"Yeah." Nicholas said quietly, then added, "And you know what usually happens to rock stars, don't you? How they end up?"

The smile fell away as Paul realized what Nicholas was saying.

"I think I can understand why." Nicholas said simply before turning away and walking toward the table at the other side of the room.

When he glanced in Amelia's direction, he could see that she had been listening.

She gave a slight dismissive shrug before walking to join Nicholas at the table.

* * * * *

"So how was it?" Nazzy asked as Paul walked into the main classroom.

"Okay, I guess." Paul said distractedly.

"Oh? That doesn't sound good."

"It wasn't bad. I'll be fine."

"No. Tell me what's bothering you. Maybe I can help."

"It's nothing. I guess that I'm just going to have to come to terms with the idea of working with amoral monsters."

"You're a demon summoner. I think that's part of the job description."

Paul looked at him curiously for a moment, then realized Nazzy's mistake, "I'm talking about my classmates."

"You got stuck with Nicholas, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I haven't had to be around him much, but he always struck me as being a real douchebag."

"He is, but that's not the problem."

"Thanks for waiting!" Vinda said as she emerged from another of the side rooms.

Nazzy's eyes lighted with delight when he saw her.

Paul looked on as they shared a quick kiss and thought about how 'right' that seemed.

"Paul was just saying that he was having a problem with Nicholas." Nazzy said as he put an arm around Vinda's shoulders.

"No. It's not like it sounds." Paul hurried to assure them.

"What is it, then?" Nazzy asked as he indicated for Paul to walk with them toward the door.

"You know how Nicholas is kind of mean and... self-centered?" Paul asked slowly.

"Yeah." Nazzy easily agreed.

"The thing that's bothering me is that I can sort of see why he's that way. I mean, not all of it, but when I look at Nicholas, I can sort of get where he's coming from and that bothers me." Paul said thoughtfully.

After a moment of walking, Vinda turned to Nazzy and asked, "Translation?"

"Paul's freaking out because he can see some of himself in someone who's a total asshole." Nazzy said simply.

Vinda considered for a moment, then seemed to accept Nazzy's assessment.

"I've never had to face something like this before. Do you have any ideas about how I can deal with it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Just spend some time with G. That should sort you out." Nazzy said with a smile.

"How will that help?" Paul asked slowly.

"Because what you're seeing is just a mind-fuck. I have no doubt that when you look at yourself reflected in G's eyes that you won't see anything remotely resembling Nicholas." Vinda said so confidently that Paul couldn't help but believe her.

"Besides that, was your class alright? Did you get to do anything?" Nazzy asked as they walked.

"Wizard lights, fireballs and I learned a spell to make my clothes adapt to my body when I change form." Paul said simply.

"Were you able to do all the spells? I mean, did they work for you?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"Yeah. I got the feeling that the teacher was surprised at how well I did." Paul said honestly.

"Then I think we can count this as a *good* day." Nazzy declared.

"How did it go? Are you alright?" G asked as he rushed down the hall.

"Yeah. I'm fine." Paul immediately assured him.

Before Paul knew what was happening, G scooped him into a hug and gave him a quick, firm kiss.

Paul's first instinct was to worry about who might see, but that only lasted an instant as he enjoyed the feeling of being adored.

Once the kiss had finally ended, G kept one arm around Paul as he asked, "Did you have any problems? Is the work too hard? Do you think that you're going to need a tutor?"

Paul chuckled at the barrage of questions and finally answered, "No. No. And not yet."

G had to pause for a moment to associate each answer with the questions he had asked.

"I really only had one class today. Before lunch I had the lecture class that was related to the practical class that I had after lunch. I didn't understand everything, but I think I got a lot out of it. I won't know about the math and science classes until I've started them." Paul said honestly.

"Since you've just changed status, they might put you in pre-numerology. But it's early enough in the year that if they put you in regular numerology, you'll probably be able to catch up to the class. They usually don't start into the difficult stuff until after the Solstice break." Vinda said thoughtfully as they began walking again.

"You might need some help catching up in Alchemy, since each lesson kind of builds on the one before it, but I can help you with that if you need it. None of it's hard, but there's kind of a lot to remember." Nazzy added.

"You mean that I don't have to take math and science?" Paul asked slowly.

"No. You take classes that show you how to magically manipulate math and science. That stuff makes a whole lot more sense when you take a step back and look at the meta-view." Vinda cheerfully explained.

"Real world." Nazzy chirped.

"What's that?" Paul asked curiously.

"We're crossing into the main part of the school. No magic talk from here on out." Nazzy said seriously.

"Oh. Okay." Paul said as he understood what Nazzy was warning him about.

As they walked, Paul thought to ask, "Is this okay? I mean, us hugging and kissing. Is anyone going to freak out on that?"

"This is fine. They don't want us making out in the halls and stuff like that. But no one has a problem with us holding hands or greeting each other with a kiss. As long as you don't go overboard, no one has a problem with it." Vinda explained.

"We had to be really careful about that when it was the three of us. I think that people were looking for things to find wrong with what we were doing." G added seriously.

"They got through it. We got through it. Hopefully, we made it easier for the next threesome." Nazzy said comfortably.

"Are you guys going to catch a van?" Curtis asked as he hurried up to the group.

"Yes. Nazzy and Vinda's is probably waiting for them. Paul's and mine should be here in a few minutes." G answered for the group.

"Mine will be here in a couple minutes too. Do you mind if I wait with you?" Curtis asked hopefully.

"No problem." G said with an easygoing smile.

"So how was your day, Paul? Are you doing better in the easier classes?" Curtis asked as he walked with the group.

"I think it's too early to tell for sure. But I haven't had any problems so far." Paul said honestly.

"That's good. I'm glad that they were willing to move you into an easier class. A lot of schools don't care and just keep hammering at you to 'get it' even if you just can't." Curtis said frankly.

"I've been in schools like that." Paul agreed, then added, "From what I've seen here so far, they want to make sure that you understand, but after that, they want to be sure that you keep building and growing and learning more. I haven't seen much of that in the other schools that I've been to."

"From what I've heard, I think public schools have different priorities, many of which don't really contribute to education." G said thoughtfully.

"I don't know much about that side of things, I just know that a lot of them were more concerned with the grade you received than if you learned anything." Paul said as they walked out the front doors of the school.

"There's our van, we've got to go." Vinda immediately announced.

"Call us if you want to go out and do anything later." G called after her.

"All I want to do is sleep off my jet lag." Vinda chuckled before hurrying away.

At Curtis' puzzled look, Paul explained, "The four of us were on our way back from Scotland yesterday. We're really tired from all the traveling."

"You were in Scotland... yesterday?" Curtis slowly asked.

"Yeah. I know how amazing it sounds, but it's not like we do something like that every weekend. We went to Scotland for our parents' wedding. It was a really big deal." Paul said as they walked out to the curb were several busses and vans were waiting.

"Our family is from there." G interjected.

"It sounds incredible." Curtis said simply.

"It really was." Paul admitted.

"Well, if something comes up like that again, maybe you can go with us. My dad was okay with inviting Nazzy and Vinda along. He even paid for their airfare." G said happily.

"Really?" Curtis asked with surprise.

"We'll just have to wait and see what happens. If it's strictly a family thing, then we won't be able to invite you. But if it's something just for fun... why not?" G said easily.

"I hope your family decides to do something really soon." Curtis said with a grin.

"I think we're going to need a few days to rest up from this last trip before we start planning any more." G said frankly.

Paul nodded his agreement.

"There's my van. I've got to go." Curtis said abruptly.

"We'll see you tomorrow." Paul called after him as he hurried away.

'*I don't know how D and Mom would feel about it.*'

'*But considering how things were before the wedding, I get the feeling that they wouldn't be too bothered by it.*'

'*As long as everyone knows what's going on in advance, having Curtis along with us might be nice.*'

'*I could remember what it feels like to be **normal** again.*'

'*Or, at least what I grew up thinking of as normal.*'

'*What **is** normal?*'

'*Am I still me?*'

* * * * *

"That one's ours, isn't it?" Paul asked when he spotted their van.

"Yeah, but hold on for a minute." G said as he took out his cellphone.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I don't know that driver. Tony might be out sick or something, but we need to be sure of what's going on before we get into the van."

"Why?" Paul asked cautiously as he waited at G's side.

"Because Dad's rich. There's always the chance that some nutjob's going to try to kidnap us." G said as he held the phone to his ear.

"If something like that happened, don't you think that we could do *something* to get out of it?"

"Maybe. But maybe not. I know that this is all still new to you, but you've got to understand that we can still be threatened, hurt, knocked out or killed. Besides, if we were to do *something* we'd run the risk of exposing ourselves. And if we were exposed, none of the witnesses would be allowed to survive. That includes other hostages, good samaritans and innocent bystanders."

Before Paul could respond, G turned his attention to his phone. "This is Gwayne Darroch. The driver of our school van isn't familiar to me. I was just calling to see if there's been a change of drivers logged."

Paul waited anxiously, unnerved by the fact that G was taking the situation so seriously.

"Yeah. I'll wait." G said, then said to Paul in a quieter voice, "Try to act casual and look around and see if anyone looks out of place."

'*Yeah. Act casual.*'

'*While my heart's beating like a drum and I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins.*'

'*Just, 'Act casual'.*'

'*No prob.*'

Regardless of how freaked out Paul was, he did his best to scan the crowd of students to see if anyone appeared to not belong there.

"Got it. Thanks." G said into the phone before turning it off.

"Is everything okay?" Paul asked nervously.

"Yeah. The driver is named Joseph Willis and according to the security company he's had a full background check. Mrs. Bright told me to be sure to ask to see his ID, but beyond that, everything should be business as usual."

"How often do things like this come up, where you have to be worried about being kidnapped?" Paul asked anxiously.

"Not too often. I mean, it's not like we live like we're prisoners or anything. Just the other day we walked home. But there are certain times and certain situations where we have to be extra careful." G said as he motioned for Paul to walk with him to the van.

"Are there any other downsides of being a rich kid that I should know about?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I can't think of any right now. It's usually pretty great." G said with a grin, then as he approached the van, he made a rolling gesture to the driver, signalling him to roll down his window.

"I'm sorry to ask, but can I see your ID?" G asked, seeming to be careful to stand at least a foot away from the open window.

"I didn't believe it when they told me, but they said that you'd ask." The man said as he unclipped his security company identification card from his shirt pocket and handed it to G.

"License, too." G said as he accepted the security company ID badge.

"Seriously?" The man asked, however his disbelief didn't prevent him from taking out his wallet.

"I could print up a security ID like this one in about four minutes on my computer... in fact, I think I'd have to downgrade some of my software to match this quality." G said as he examined the ID in detail.

"I guess I can see your point." The driver relented as he waited for G to finish his examination.

"What happened to Tony?" G asked as he handed the ID and license back.

"Dunno. Boss just told me to run this route, didn't say why." The driver said frankly.

G motioned to Paul to get into the van.

"Most days I work on the armored car. The funny thing is, I don't think that any of the businesses that I've visited have checked me out as thoroughly as you just did."

"Maybe if it was their lives at stake instead of their money, they'd be a little more motivated." G said as he followed Paul into the back of the van.

"You might be right about that." The driver chuckled.

"Thanks for waiting! I thought I was going to miss you." A Chinese girl said as she rushed to get into the van. Of course Paul had seen her in the van before, but much like on any public transportation, they didn't introduce themselves.

"I keep telling you, you don't have to hurry. They'll wait for you." A boy's voice said from outside.

Paul watched as the ginger boy took his own sweet time climbing into the van, taking the seat in front of G.

"Before we leave, I need your names." The driver said into the back.

"Wait. You're not our regular driver!" The girl said accusingly.

'*Observant, aren't we?*'

"My name is Joseph Willis, you can call me Joe if you like. Would you please tell me your names so that I can be sure that I've got the right people?"

"My name is Sandy and this is Dex. You'll have to ask the others who they are, we don't associate with them." Sandy said primly.

"I'm G and this is Paul. He's my brother... and my lover." G said before leaning in to give Paul a *very* deep and passionate kiss.

"Ewww! Make them stop!" Sandy shrieked.

"Does anyone know if someone named Catherine Cook is going to be joining us?" Joe asked professionally.

"Cathy's in my class. She wasn't in school today." G said simply.

"Thank you, Mr. Darroch." Joe said respectfully, then said to the group, "If no one has anything else, we'll be leaving now."

"Aren't you going to do something about them making out, right here in front of everybody?!" Sandy demanded.

"Of course." Joe told her, then looked further back into the van and said, "If you get anything on the seats, there's going to be an extra charge."

"It'll be *totally* worth it." G said with a grin back at him.

Joe nodded once, then started the van.

* * * * *

Although Paul was slightly embarrassed by the makeout session in the back seat, listening to Sandy's overly dramatic cries of disgust made the whole thing worth it.

When the van pulled up to their house, G and Paul got out, then waved at Sandy as the van pulled away.

"Sorry about that. I know that what we do together isn't for everyone else to see, but I just couldn't help myself." G said repentantly.

"I probably wouldn't have done that, but I've got no problem." Paul said honestly.

"Good. I just didn't want you to be worried that we'd be putting on a show like that for everyone we meet. It's just that Sandy's so..." G trailed off, looking for the right word.

"Is she a witch?" Paul asked curiously as they walked around the front of the house.

"You missed it by one letter." G said with a grin.

"Okay. That's good. I wouldn't want to have to watch out for her magical retribution on us." Paul said frankly.

"Actually, I wouldn't relax just yet. Dex is a witch." G said frankly.

"Sandy was making such a stink about us, I didn't really notice how Dex was reacting." Paul said slowly.

"I think Dex is a 'live and let live' kind of a guy most of the time. But if he were forced to pick sides, he'd probably side with Sandy. I don't think he's irredeemably evil, but he seems to be hungry for acceptance so he hangs on the fringes of a group of really nasty 'fluffy bunnies'." G said as he unlocked the front door of his little house.

"I've met the type." Paul said with a nod.

"I don't think he'll do anything unless the hive mind makes him think that he'll get some crumbs of their attention if he does something horrible to us." G said frankly.

"I kind of figured that 'witch school' would be different from regular school somehow." Paul said honestly.

"Nope. We've got the same freaks and geeks, assholes and losers as any other school." G said simply.

Paul let out a long sigh, then looked at G curiously before asking, "Are you hungry?"

G shrugged.

"I'm hungry. Let's raid the fridge before we get started on homework." Paul said decisively.

"Okay." G said easily as he set his backpack beside the couch.

* * * * *

Walking into the kitchen, Paul was surprised to find a platter of nachos made on wedges of pita bread, sitting on the counter, hot and waiting for them.

"Is this for us?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Who else would it be for?"

"Wait. I've been wondering about this since we moved here. Who's been cooking all the food? I know it's not my mom because she never cooked anything like this." Paul asked before taking a bite of one of the nachos.

"Do you want the truth?"

"No. Lie to me. I like it."

The reply caught G off guard and he nearly choked on his nacho.

"Come on, who's been cooking the food?" Paul asked with a smile.

"Grandma... sort of."

"Not Grandma Gruit?"

"No. Grandma B."

Paul went to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of apple juice, then walked to the cabinet and took down a juice glass. He looked at G with question and received a nod in response.

After filling glasses for them both, Paul asked, "So how is your grandmother cooking our food all the way from Scotland?"

"*Our* grandmother came to visit right after this house was built and enchanted most of the kitchen and dining room. To be honest, I don't know how it all works. Grandma's specialty is basic magic, sometimes called *household* magic. Don't be fooled by her, she's scary powerful."

"So the kitchen kind of just *knows* when we want something and makes it for us?"

"Yeah. I don't know how it does it, but it even knows that Vinda doesn't like meat very much, so it makes vegetarian dishes for her when she stops by." G said casually between bites of nachos.

"Well, I guess it beats having to cook for yourself all the time."

"Yeah. And if I had to count on Dad to cook for me when I was growing up, I probably wouldn't even know what a vegetable looks like. It would've been steaks on the grill every night."

"If your dad likes to cook steaks on the grill, I think I'd really like to try that. I mean, it wasn't my mom's fault, she was always really busy. But I've always heard about dads cooking steaks on the grill and I felt like I missed out on something."

"Believe it or not, Dad actually has a job that he has to do. I doubt that he'll have time to cook out on the grill during the week, but I bet if we asked him, he'd do a cookout for us next weekend."

"No. It's just a silly daydream of mine. I wouldn't want to put him to a lot of trouble."

"Trust me, he'll love doing it."

Paul nodded, since his mouth was full of nachos.

"Do you have a lot of homework?"

"I have to write a report."

"On your first day? That's kind of harsh!"

"Not really. It's actually kind of a compliment."

"How's that?"

"Today in class, I did this spell and I'm not sure, because I haven't been around magic that much, but I guess it was really good or special or something because Professor Ortega asked me to write a report telling how I did it."

"Professor Ortega? The Senior Professor of Wizardry personally asked you to write a report about one of your spells?"

"Yeah."

"What kind of spell was it?"

"Stand back and I'll show you."

"You aren't going to be summoning any demons in here are you? Because I don't want the sulfur smell getting into the food."

"No. I'm not summoning anything. Just take a step back and look."

G took a single step back, then watched as Paul held his hands out in front of him.

A glowing diagram began to appear, along with symbols in a language that G didn't recognize.

A movement drew G's attention and he watched as Paul made the same gesture with both hands, then looked down when seven little balls of fire appeared, one on each of the points of the heptagram.

"I created this, then Nicholas used my spell diagram to summon a demon, a Yan-gant-y-tan." Paul said carefully, maintaining his concentration.

"The detail is amazing!" G said as he knelt down to look at the diagram more closely.

"Well, it's not like I came up with the diagram on my own or anything. I just copied it from the back of the book."

"What are you...?" A voice began to ask, then silenced.

Paul glanced toward the door and saw his mother frozen in place.

"Hi Mom. I was just showing G what I did at school today." Paul said as he turned the majority of his attention back to maintaining his spell diagram.

"I haven't seen a diagram like that in years." Beth said as she walked slowly to her son's side.

"I still can't do anything with it, but the Professor seemed to be really impressed that I was able to make it."

"Paul, I've never seen *anyone* create a spell diagram like that. I've heard stories about the most elite demon summoners being able to cast a circle at will, but I've never personally witnessed it."

"Do you think that when you have some time that you might be able to show me some demon summoning things? I'm way behind everyone else in my class and it'd probably help."

"Yes. But we're going to have to do it quickly. Sometime within the next month, I'll probably lose all access to my summoning abilities. The baby will need to infuse all my magic until it can sustain its own."

"You don't have to show me a bunch of magic, I can see that at school. What I need is to know how things work; the do's and don'ts, the stuff that all the other demon summoners already know by the time that they're my age."

"That sounds like a good idea. And you're right, I won't need to give you a magical demonstration to illustrate what I'm talking about, but there *is* one thing that I will need to demonstrate before I lose my ability to do so."

"What's that?"

"We are descended from a long line of demon summoners. Even though the rest of our family have turned their backs on us, this knowledge is your rightful legacy. This distinct method of summoning isn't possible for witches not of our bloodline. It's only right that I pass it on to you."

"The Senior Professor of Wizardry at our school asked Paul to write a report on how he was able to make that spell diagram." G said proudly.

"I can understand why. Not only is that seen to be a high-level technique, but it serves one of the most basic functions in summoning." Beth said simply.

"Okay. It's special. It's great." Paul said flatly, then looked G in the eyes and asked, "But couldn't you do *exactly* the same thing with one of your illusions?"

"No. Not even close." G said honestly.

Paul looked at him dubiously.

G rolled his eyes, then made a grand gesture with both hands toward the floor beside Paul's diagram. Another septagram appeared, perhaps not *quite* as bright or sharp as the original. The fireballs at the points looked nice, but the symbols written throughout the diagram were sloppy gibberish at best.

"If I knew what the symbols meant or how to read that language, I *might* be able to do it, but the level of detail is just *way*too much for me to recreate at this point."

"You'll run into that quite a bit with summoning diagrams. They're very detailed and one little mistake can cause them to fail to summon, or even worse, fail to contain what *has been* summoned."

"I noticed that our teacher is really careful to check over the diagram before he lets Nicholas summon anything." Paul said thoughtfully.

"So you created this diagram so that *someone else* could use it?" Beth asked to confirm.

"Yeah. It was my first day. This is as much as I could do."

"If you want to help other witches with their summoning, that's fine. As long as it's of your own free will, I have no problem with it. But if you're creating spell diagrams for other witches because you *can't* summon a demon for yourself... that is *not*okay."

"Whats wrong?"

"The strong dominate the weak."

"Yeah. Dominance and submission. The rule of the demon world."

"I'm talking about the rule of the summoner's world. If you aren't one of the more powerful summoners, then you end up working for one of them, doing their dirty work, doing the things that are 'beneath them'."

"What if I don't want to be a summoner at all?"

"I could accept that as long as it's your honest choice and not a lack of training that makes you face that decision."

"Okay. If you want to teach me stuff, I've got no problem with that. Just as long as you're not disappointed if I don't want to become the biggest best demon summoner that ever was."

"It may take me a few days to get everything together that I'll need. But before I lose my witchcraft, I'll make sure that you've been given the Hiller family legacy."

"Want some nachos?" G asked as he pointed to the last few pita chips on the platter.

"No... you boys are going to spoil your... grrr... okay. The baby wants one." Beth finally grudgingly said before taking one of the pita nachos.

Chapter 3

After enjoying the last of the nachos, Paul and G went back to G's room to begin their homework.

"I've got some sorcery to work on, so I won't need the computer for a little bit." G said as they walked into the living room.

"Where's your computer?" Paul asked cautiously.

"In my study."

"Where's your study?"

"Through the double doors in the bedroom." G said as he motioned for Paul to follow him.

"Oh, I thought that was more closet space."

"Nope. Dad made sure to set me up with a 'dedicated workspace' so that when it was time to study, I'd have a place without too many distractions." G said as he opened the louvered doors to reveal a small neat desk and bookcase.

"Are you sure that you aren't going to need the computer?"

"Yeah. I've got to work on my focus and visualizations right now. I don't have any homework from my other classes, so you can use it as much as you want."

"Okay, but let me know if you need me to move or anything."

G walked over to a small panel by the door and pressed a button before asking, "Dad? Do you have a minute?"

"*One minute.*" D's voice responded.

"Do you have a spare laptop or anything that Paul can use? He has some school work to do and he's worried that I'm going to need the computer at the same time he does."

"*Yes. If you'll come to my study, I have a couple that you can choose from. Later this week, I'll see to it that Paul gets his own dedicated workspace.*"

"You don't have to do anything extra for me. I was just worried that G might not be able to do all his work because I was hogging his computer." Paul said quickly.

"*Paul, as your father, it's my responsibility to provide the tools for your success. As my son, it's your responsibility to put those tools to good use. Don't argue. That's just the way it is. Now come to the study and pick up a laptop to get you by until I can make arrangements for you to have your own workspace.*"

"Okay." Paul said quietly, then quickly added, "Thanks."

After turning off the intercom, G smiled and said, "Come on, I'll show you where it is."

"I don't want for anyone to go to any trouble for me." Paul muttered as he followed.

"Too bad." G said as he put an arm around Paul and gave him a quick firm hug.

* * * * *

Paul was surprised when G led him to D's study. Although he had been there once before, the 'museum' was such a labyrinthine maze of rooms and hallways that he couldn't get a sense of where anything was located.

Truth be told, Paul hadn't had much of an opportunity to see more than the kitchen and dining room. He spent most of his time in G's room.

G led the way as Paul followed along silently.

"If you'll check those messenger bags by the door, you should be able to find a laptop that will get you by for a while." D said without looking up from his work.

"Do you need to clear anything off of them before we start messing with these?" G asked cautiously.

"No. I've gotten into the habit of wiping them once I've gotten all the files transferred over. Those should all be fully loaded with all the software that you'll be needing, completely up-to-date and fully charged." D said as he finally turned to face the boys.

"Did the tech guys give you a little extra something to make that happen?" G asked curiously.

"Yes. I'll show that to you when I have more time, but I have quite a bit of work to catch up on right now." D said regretfully.

"Got it." G said to his father, then turned to Paul and said, "Grab one and let's go."

"Are they all the same?" Paul asked uncertainly.

Before G could answer, D said, "Each laptop is optimized for a specific task, whether it be high RAM, superior video processing or excessive storage capacity. When I need a laptop, I'll choose the one best suited to the job. But for your purposes, I'm sure that any of them will do."

Paul pushed past his indecision and picked up the first messenger bag.

"Will you be able to eat dinner with us tonight?" G asked hopefully.

"Unless something creeps up that I'm not expecting, I should be able to take a break around then."

"We'll see you then." G said before ushering Paul out the door.

* * * * *

"He looks tired." Paul said quietly as they walked.

"Yeah. He's responsible for a lot of different things. Usually he can touch on each one to get updated and let the momentum carry them forward, but after taking time off, he has to dig deep into each thing before getting each project moving again." G said thoughtfully.

"What does he do?"

"Lots of stuff."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"It's as much as I know. He doesn't do just one thing. Lots of people do lots of things and Dad kind of coordinates it all. If he's not in charge, things can keep on working for a while, but eventually they fall out of synch and different things start working against each other."

"I still don't know what he does."

"I think he does a lot of things, but one of the most important ones is that he makes sure that everyone reaches their goals without interfering with each other while they do it."

"So if anyone asks what my dad does for a living, I should just tell them 'Traffic Cop'?"

"If they don't already know who he is, you might as well tell them that because they probably aren't anyone who matters, anyway."

"You sound like a stuck-up rich kid." Paul chuckled.

"I'm proud of my dad." G said simply.

Paul thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I'm proud of him too."

* * * * *

When they got back to G's room, Paul cleared a space for himself on G's desk and opened the laptop.

He turned it on, then asked, "Do you know the password?"

"Open that drawer under my computer." G said absently as he kept his focus on his own work.

Paul did so, then asked, "What am I looking for?"

"Do you see a dried out chicken foot?"

"Yeah."

"Take that and wave it over the keyboard and it should let you in."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. It's a charm that one of the tech guys made for us. It beats having to remember a bunch of passwords."

Paul cautiously picked up the chicken foot, then hesitantly waved it over the keyboard.

As G had said, the password screen cleared and the desktop revealed itself.

"Does this work on any computer, or just this one?"

"It will work on any computer that belongs to us and we have permission to use."

"The chicken foot knows if we have permission?" Paul asked dubiously.

"Don't get hung up on the chicken foot. It's kind of a joke. They just needed something to enchant and thought that a chicken foot would be funny. I think Dad's password charm is a USB thumb drive."

"Okay..." Paul said uncertainly as he returned the chicken foot to its place in the drawer.

* * * * *

After over half an hour of typing on the computer, Paul quietly asked, "Do you know how to use this drawing program? I've never used it before."

"Just a minute." G said distantly.

"What are you working on?" Paul asked curiously as he approached.

"Sorcery." G said as he quickly turn to face Paul.

Paul could tell that G didn't want to talk about it, so he asked, "Do you know how to use this drawing program? I need to draw the spell diagram for the next part of my report so that someone who's reading it will be able to follow along and know what I'm talking about."

"Can't you just scan it in from the book?"

"The book's at school."

"Do you think that you can remember all the details of the diagram."

Rather than answer verbally, Paul glanced toward the floor as the diagram appeared.

"You can create the spell diagram without using any words or gestures?"

"I just do them internally. Mr. Gilbert said that I could do that if I wanted to."

"Paul, I don't know if you understand that what you're doing is a really high-level technique."

"Or I'm using the lowest of the low level techniques in a way that looks flashy and impressive."

"It's impressive enough for Professor Ortega to ask you to write a report about it."

"Yeah. But he only wants me to do that to show how a simple spell can be used differently."

"Okay... have we argued enough?"

"Enough for what?"

"So that we can kiss and make up?"

"Yeah. I think so." Paul said with a smile.

G moved in and gave Paul a truly memorable kiss.

When the kiss finally ended, Paul gently asked, "Can you show me how to use the drawing program?"

"That program is part of an office suite. It's good for some officey type things but I've got some professional art programs on my computer that will probably be easier for you to understand and better suited to what you're trying to do."

"Do you draw or paint?"

"Sometimes. But just to design my illusions. I don't draw for fun. I've never understood people who did that."

"With as beautiful as your illusions are, there's no way that you could be described as anything less than an artist."

"We already had our fight for tonight, so I'm not going to disagree with you about it, but either way, I don't draw or paint for fun. I do it as a stepping stone on my way to making my illusions look more real than a 1990's video game."

"Like how?" Paul asked curiously.

"In the really old games, they would have one picture of one brick and they'd use it to make all the walls in the entire game. When I first started, my illusions would sometimes be like that, just the same thing over and over. If I made a forest, it'd be two or three hundred of exactly the same tree."

"All I know is that the illusion you did after the wedding was *perfect*. Not only was everyone impressed by it, but it made the wedding seem that much more special for my mom and your dad."

"Yeah. That really did turn out well, didn't it?" G asked with a smile.

"Everybody loved it." Paul confirmed.

"Let me show you my art program before we get sidetracked any more." G said seriously.

"Before you do that, I just thought of something that I need to ask your advice about."

"Sure. What?"

"When I read the original spell in the book that Mr. Gilbert gave me, the spell diagram was missing a part. I was able to fill it in, but now I realize why it was left blank."

"Why is that?"

"Because if *any* demon summoner had access to the completed diagram with the locus intact, they would have everything they needed to summon a demon, whether they really meant to or not."

"Do you mean that you can *accidently* summon a demon?"

"Well, a non-witch can't, of course. But if a witch with a summoning ability has the diagram... like my illustration, and has the words, which will be included in my report, then they could read the spell, aloud or silently, and actually summon a demon right then and there without really meaning to."

"Somehow I didn't think it was that easy to summon a demon."

"Actually, it isn't. There's a lot of stuff about your force of will and balancing power dynamics and other stuff that I don't really understand. But it's still possible that someone like me could read the spell and that everything would line up so that I'd have an actual demon appear right in front of me out of nowhere."

"I can see how that would be a surprise."

"Yeah. And if they're not skilled, they might not be able to contain it, control it or send it back." Paul carefully explained.

"Okay..."

"I guess I just answered my own question. I'm going to leave the locus out of the spell diagram so that no one can accidentally use it in it's printed form."

"Yeah. Letting demons loose... not a good idea."

"Oh, yeah. I wanted to show you the other thing that I learned today." Paul said happily.

Before G could ask what it was, Paul began to grow in height and mass as horns and hooves came into being.

"You're getting better at that!"

"Look at my clothes, they're not all torn up. I learned how to make them change when I change." Paul said in his much lower voice.

"Where did your shoes go?" G asked as he looked at Paul's hooves.

"I don't know. The same place my feet went, I guess. But the cool thing is that now I don't have to worry about tearing up your uniforms if something happens and I need to change all of a sudden." Paul said happily.

"I never needed to learn that one. When I let my magic go full-out, all that happens is that my skin and hair color change."

"And you look awesome."

"Look who's talking."

"Will you show me your art program?"

"Yeah. But you need to change back first or I might not be able to focus on showing you how to use the program."

"Do you have some demon fantasies that I should know about?"

"Just change back. We have work to do."

'*I'll take that as a **yes**.*'

* * * * *

"*Boys! Dinner will be ready in just a few minutes!*" Beth's voice called over the intercom.

"How does she know that, if the house is doing all the cooking?" Paul asked as he saved his work.

"Her saying it lets the house know that we'll be going to the dining room soon. That sort of triggers it to get everything ready." G said simply.

"Did you get a lot of work done?" Paul asked curiously as he backed away from G's computer.

"Yeah. At least, I've almost finished the base. I don't have to have the project done until Friday." G said as he stretched.

"Can you tell me what you're doing?"

"Ask me again after dinner and I'll show you. You'll just have to keep in mind that it's not in its final form."

"Okay." Paul said as he walked to the laptop and made sure to save his work there too.

"What about you? How's your stuff going?"

"You were right about the art programs. I still have quite a bit to do, but I'm happy with the way it's going."

"Do you think that you'll be able to finish it tonight?"

"Yeah. The report's mostly written. I just need to go through it and make sure it all matches up to the illustration."

"I'm glad you're not having any problem writing the report. I know a lot of people struggle with that." G said as he led the way out into the hallway that led to the main house.

"About two or three schools ago, I was stuck in this one that made us do tons of reports. I kinda got used to the process."

"From the way you talked, I got the feeling that most of the schools you attended were sub-par, but report writing is a valuable skill."

"We had to write reports on articles from the Reader's Digest from the past fifty or sixty years, one after another, day after day. It was miserable."

"Sounds like it."

"But I guess it helped me to look up references and do research and that kind of stuff. As much as it sucked, I think I learned a lot more at that school than most of the others."

"Well, you're here now. I think you'll like this school."

"Yeah. I'm liking it so far."

* * * * *

"Did Dad say if he was going to be joining us?" G asked as he led the way into the dining room.

"Yes. I talked to him just a minute ago and he said that he had to finalize a few things and that he'd be right in." Beth said pleasantly.

"That sounds like about ten minutes to me." G said as he took his seat.

Paul smiled affectionately at G as he took the seat across from him, noticing that all the food in the middle of the table was covered with silver domed lids.

"How is your studying going? Are you getting a lot of work done?" Beth asked curiously.

Paul looked to G to see if he wanted to answer first but found the same expression mirrored back at him.

"You're the alpha." Paul said with a grin.

G smiled, then said, "We got assigned a new project today, so I've been doing the groundwork on that. Since it's only the first day, I'm in a good place."

Paul smiled at the answer, then said, "I've been working on that report I was telling you about. I'm making an illustration of the spell diagram, so that's taking some time, but once that's done, I should be able to pull it all together. I've probably got another hour of work left."

"I hope this isn't an indication of how things are going to be around here. I'd like it if we could have the opportunity to do things as a family."

"Mom, we've just spent most of the past week traveling to Europe and back and we've been together most of that time. Once everyone gets their stuff caught up, I'm sure that we'll have time to do things together." Paul said frankly, then continued, "And if you're worried about us 'bonding' and coming together as a family, I love you, I love G and I love D. What more do you want?"

After a moment, Beth quietly said, "I guess that when I dreamed about what it would be like to have a family of my own... it doesn't matter... it's silly."

"Mom. We'll have special moments like that. I promise. But we're not going to have them all the time. In fact, we'll probably end up having them when you least expect it." Paul said frankly.

"Unless something really big and super important comes up, Dad takes the weekends off. So if you're wanting to do any big 'family' things, that's probably the best time to do them." G finished with a smile at Beth.

"That sounds like a good idea. And that gives me all week to plan something that we'll all enjoy doing." Beth said happily.

"I was telling Paul just a little bit ago about how good Dad's steaks are. Maybe we could have a cookout?" G suggested hopefully.

"Yes. We'll have to wait and see what the weather's going to be like, but I can imagine that it might be an enjoyable way to spend an afternoon."

"Yeah. And if you've got all week to plan it, we could even go somewhere for the day, maybe rent a boat or go to a park or something." G said excitedly.

"'Rent' a boat? Somehow I thought your dad would already own one." Paul said with a grin at G.

"He does, but we'd have to fly to get there." G responded casually.

Paul had been joking and was left speechless.

* * * * *

"I'm willing to wait for D to join us, but the baby isn't." Beth said as she stood.

Before she could remove the dome from the first dish in the middle of the table, D hurried into the room.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long." D said quickly.

"You're right on time. The baby just decided that it's hungry." Beth said to him with a smile.

"How is baby doing today?" D asked warmly.

"So far it's just been hungry." Beth said as she reached forward again and revealed the main course.

"Oh good. I've been hungry for ribs!" D said happily.

Beth got a curious look for a moment, then said, "I get the feeling that the baby has been too."

"So I'm guessing that you haven't found out if it's a boy or a girl yet." G said as he lifted two other silver domes, revealing a kale salad and some steamed broccoli with cheese sauce.

"No. We've decided that we'd like to wait and find out the old fashioned way." Beth said, then smiled at her husband adoringly.

"But doesn't that mean that you're going to have to wait till the last minute to fix up the baby's room and buy clothes and stuff?" G asked curiously.

"Not really. The nursery may have some pink or blue things in it, but it will have lots of other colors too." Beth said simply.

"Beth has volunteered to design the nursery so that everything can be done to her specifications." D said as he served himself some of the vegetables.

"Since I left my job, I'll have the time to do some research and plan what I'm doing in advance." Beth said frankly.

"Are you upset about leaving your job?" G asked curiously.

"I miss the social aspect of it a little. But the drive to work from here would be impractical, and with the baby coming, it would only get more and more difficult." Beth said honestly, then added, "As for the job itself, good riddance."

D laughed at the statement, then said, "If everything goes well, the business that I was conducting in town will be concluded soon, so there won't be any reason for me to have to go into town as often."

"Except when we drive in to have lunch at 'our' lunch counter." Beth said with a tender smile at him.

"We'll make a point of doing that often." D assured her.

"If you're missing the people that you work with, maybe you could have a baby shower or something and invite them out here. Not only would it give you a chance to visit with your friends, but that way they'll know where you're living now so that they can come and visit you sometime." G thoughtfully suggested.

"It would feel kind of strange to throw a party for myself." Beth said honestly.

"Well, call it a house warming party or a reception for your wedding or something like that. It doesn't matter what you call it, it's just an excuse to stick some food and drinks in them and visit for a while." G said seriously.

"You know, that actually sounds like a good idea. I know that you haven't had much of a chance to meet new people since you've been here. I can see how you might start to feel isolated." D said with concern.

"If you're worried about that, then maybe you could set something up to invite some people from around here over. I bet that Nazzy and Vinda's parents would come over if you invited them. And you know enough people from your work and stuff that you could have a really massive party if you wanted to." G said to his father.

"I don't know if any of us but you are temperamentally suited to a 'massive party', but I agree that it might be nice to plan a get-together or two with some of my acquaintances to introduce Beth and Paul to them." D said slowly.

"Yeah. And they're always inviting us to the theater and other snooty things. Maybe you could start doing stuff like that too, if you wanted." G suggested.

"There's no need for us to make any decisions about this tonight. You've made some good suggestions and given us some things to discuss." D said thoughtfully.

Paul noticed that G seemed to be pleased that his father had taken his suggestions so seriously.

* * * * *

There were a few minutes of silence as everyone turned their attention to their meals, but something occurred to Paul and he finally asked, "Have you been thinking of names for the baby yet?"

"K." Beth said with a tender smile at her husband.

"K? What does it stand for?" Paul asked cautiously.

"If it's a boy, it will be spelled, K-a-e. It doesn't stand for anything, that will be his name." Beth said simply.

"And if it's a girl?" Paul prompted.

"Then it will be spelled K-a-y."

"That's it? You're not even going to think about other names?" Paul asked dubiously.

"Who's to say that we won't consider other names between now and the time the baby's born? But at this point in time, I'm considering it settled." Beth finished with a smile.

"What if it's twins?" G asked cautiously.

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it." D told his son firmly.

* * * * *

"I think that this is the best bar-b-que I've ever tasted in my life." Paul said abruptly.

"The thing is, you'll probably say the same thing the next time we have bar-b-que. Every time we have it, it tastes like it's the absolute best." G said happily.

"I can't wait to find out!" Paul said with a grin before diving in to eat more of the impossibly delicious ribs.

"The baby likes the ribs too." Beth said between bites.

"Obviously. As my child the baby will, of course, have excellent taste." D said with a grin.

"Does that apply to me too?" G asked his father curiously.

"Absolutely." D said without hesitation.

"Okay. I can accept that." G said easily.

* * * * *

"So, Paul, I was meaning to ask how the laptop was working out for you. Do you have everything you need?" D asked curiously.

"Well, when I got to the part of my report when I had to make an illustration, G let me use his computer because it has a lot better art programs. But as far as doing the report itself, the laptop has had everything that I've needed."

"You might think about making a list of what programs G has that you'd like to have on your own computer, as well as any other programs that you might like to have. If you get it to me in time, I can give it to the tech guys and they can see that everything is loaded properly and optimized for the best performance."

"They could just clone what I've got on my computer, if that would be easier... well, except for the porn. Paul would probably want to get his own." G added as an aside.

Everyone, even D, fell silent as they looked at G in shock.

"What?" G asked when he noticed.

"Certain subjects aren't appropriate at the dinner table." D told his son slowly and condescendingly.

"I used to be able to say whatever I wanted when it was just the two of us. Are Beth and Paul our family or not?" G asked challengingly.

"That's not the point. Certain things aren't discussed in polite conversation." D reiterated.

"I get that it's not right to talk about gross-out stuff when people are eating, but are you saying that I have to behave like I do when I'm at school, even when I'm at home in my own house with my own family?" G asked seriously.

"There's a time and a place..." D began to say, but was interrupted.

"When?" G challenged. "When are we all together in a time and place where it *is* appropriate to say what we're honestly thinking and feeling? Because besides mealtime, I can't think of a time when we're even in the same room."

"D?" Beth asked quietly.

After a moment more of glaring at G, D glanced at Beth inquiringly.

"I'd much rather the boys know that they can discuss what's on their minds with us when we're together as a family. If you want to spend time with the boys when they're on their best behavior, then maybe you could take them someplace that demands their 'best behavior'. I think home should be where they can be themselves." Beth said gently.

"Okay. I understand what you're saying." D finally relented, then added, "But I still don't think that it's right to discuss my son's porn stash at the dinner table."

"I wasn't going to give you details or anything. I was just saying that my computer has all the programs that I need for school. Instead of trying to make a list of all the programs that Paul *might possibly* need, the tech guys could just clone my computer and have it all done in one easy step."

"I can see that being a reasonable way of doing it." D conceded, then turned to Paul and asked, "Can you think of any programs that you'd like to have besides the ones on G's computer?"

"No. Not really." Paul said honestly, then added, "But I wouldn't mind getting a copy of that porn stash. I don't really have one of my own."

Although Paul was a bit worried about D's reaction, he felt that it was important to show G his support within the family structure.

"I don't know. A guy's porn stash is kind of a private thing. How about I help you set up your own? When I see what you like, I may have a few things to contribute to it." G said thoughtfully.

"You know..." Beth said, gaining everyone's attention, "...pregnancy can cause a woman's libido to shoot right through the roof..."

"I'm out!" Paul said immediately.

"Yeah. I see what you mean, Dad." G said quickly, then added, "Look at the time! We've got to get back to work."

As the boys rushed out of the dining room, D looked adoringly at his wife and quietly said, "Thank you."

Beth responded with a beaming smile.

* * * * *

"Before you go back to your report, do you want to see what I've been working on?" G asked as they crossed the bridge into G's room.

"Yeah. With as hard as you've been working on it, I'm sure it's going to be great." Paul said enthusiastically.

As soon as they were in the living room, G quietly said, "Well, here it goes."

Paul watched as G's features changed, becoming more and more clown-like.

G made the 'lifting' gesture that Paul had come to associate with G putting forth a great effort.

Suddenly, in the space between them, a vaguely humanoid shape began to form.

Paul's eyes went wide with surprise. He didn't know what he had been expecting, but that wasn't it.

"Hold on... hold on..." G said as he struggled to complete his vision.

Facial features began to appear on the illusory construct, but they somehow seemed wrong. The eyes and mouth seemed to be too big for the face, but the nose was bigger still; it was enormous.

Paul was stunned into speechlessness for a moment, but was finally able to say, "That's amazing! That's got to be the creepiest looking gargoyle that I've ever seen."

"It's supposed to be a self-portrait." G hesitantly admitted.

"Oh." Paul cringed, then quickly added, "Well, it *does* have a nice ass."

G stared at Paul for a moment, then broke into an unwilling smile.

Paul stepped around the illusion and pulled G into a hug as he quietly said, "I know that it'll be great when you've got it finished."

"I hope so. This is the first really difficult assignment that we've gotten this year. I don't want to start off behind." G said anxiously.

"Just think it through and make it happen. I know that you'll blow everyone away with it." Paul said warmly.

G chuckled, then said, "I guess since you impressed the senior professor of your department, you'd know what it takes."

Paul lightly kissed G on the ear, then whispered, "Count on it."

"We'd better get to work. We both still have things to do."

"Right." Paul reluctantly conceded as he let go of G.

"Will it bother you if I leave my illusion up while you're working?" G asked cautiously.

"No. It won't bother me at all."

"Just let me know if it starts to bug you. I can do it in my head if I need to." G said as he sat on the floor with his legs crossed.

"It's fine, but do you mind if I give it a name? I feel funny calling it... it."

"Go ahead. I never thought about naming one of my illusions before."

Paul looked at the poor misshapen thing for a moment, then slowly said, "How about if we call him 'Lex'?"

"Like Lex Luthor?" G asked dubiously.

"No. Like Lexington, a gargoyle from the cartoon show."

"I don't think I've ever seen that."

"I didn't think so, it didn't have any big-boobed schoolgirls or mech-warriors."

"We've gotten off track again. We *really* need to get to work."

"Yeah, but I wonder if maybe I should get you to show me how you do it. I know that visualization's not part of wizardry but maybe with your help I could do something more with my wizard lights."

"Considering what you've already been able to accomplish, maybe *I* should be getting *your* help with visualization."

"We'll help each other... after we get some work done." Paul said decisively.

"Right."

* * * * *

G's work consisted mostly of meditation with an occasional glance up at 'Lex' for reference.

Paul was working quietly on the drawing program on G's computer, trying to perfect his diagram.

"I think I got it." Paul finally said, snapping G out of his concentration.

"You've finished your report?" G asked curiously.

"No. But I finished the diagram. Do you want to see?" Paul asked as he backed away from G's computer.

"Sure." G said as he slowly got up from the floor, only just realizing how long he'd been sitting there in the same position.

"I think that's as good as I can get it."

"The amount of detail you put into it is amazing. I'm going to get you to help me the next time I have to do anything complicated like that."

"I'll always be happy to help if I can." Paul said warmly, then quickly thought to ask, "How's yours coming?"

"I think I'm ready to try it out." G said as he turned his attention to the illusion standing frozen in front of him.

Paul watched as G's coloring changed and became clown-like. He was surprised to realize that the 'clown' makeup wasn't*exactly* the same as it had been before. The painted on smirk that G had worn before was now replaced by a scowl.

Before Paul could say anything about it, G slowly raised his arms and concentrated on his objective.

Paul watched as 'Lex' began to change. Overall, his proportions in relation to each other seemed to become more realistic.

"I didn't notice before, but the clothes look really good." Paul said as he paid more attention to the detail work on the red tee shirt and blue jeans.

"Yeah. We've been working on that for a few weeks now. They do their best to make one lesson build on another so it doesn't feel like we're always learning a bunch of unrelated things." G said as he carefully looked over his handiwork.

"Do you need to visualize and plan each thing that you're doing before you make your illusion?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. I do all the planning on, like, this internal canvas in my mind's eye, or something like that. Once I've made all the changes there, I can focus my power to make that image come to life in the real world. The funny thing is that sometimes

what you start with isn't exactly what you end up with." G finished as he looked regretfully at his creation.

"Your other illusions looked perfect. Did you have to go through all of this with them too?" Paul asked curiously.

"Not as much. Sometimes I need to make adjustments, but they mostly come out like I envision them. For some reason, when it comes to 'alive' things, it's more tricky. Not just people, but animals too. They tend to look really 'fake' unless I go back and do a lot of detail work on them."

"What kind of animals can you do?"

"Right now, I can only do a hedgehog and an otter."

"Those seem kind of random."

"Yeah. I just didn't want to do the same 'dogs and cats' as everyone else. Those are the only animals that I've taken the time to try and perfect so far.

"Can I see?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Okay, hold out your hand."

Paul did so, and a moment later he saw a small, pointy-nosed little animal resting in his palm looking up at him with tiny beady black eyes.

"This is amazing! He looks completely real!"

"Yeah. I got an A+ on that one." G said with a smile, then added more grimly, "But people are a whole lot harder than animals. I can't believe how drastically different the final product was from my original vision. This is going to take a lot of work."

"I'll let you get back to it. I still need to put the finishing touches on my report. I'd like to get it finished so that I can have some time to do something else before bedtime."

"Let me know when you're done for the night and I'll finish up too."

"What do you want me to do with this?" Paul asked as he held up the hedgehog.

G smiled, then the hedgehog vanished.

On impulse, Paul leaned in and gave G a quick kiss before returning to the computer.

* * * * *

"That's it. I think I'm done." Paul announced triumphantly.

"Good. Let me see how this turned out, then I should be done too." G said as he slowly made his way to standing.

"Wouldn't it be better to sit in a chair?"

"No. I'm not sure why, but I'm able to visualize better sitting on the floor."

"When you're done, would you read my report and see if I missed anything?"

"Sure. Just let me do this first."

Paul watched as G focused on 'Lex' and made the alterations.

The illusion didn't look entirely 'human' but Paul had to admit that it did look better.

In its new state, Paul could now at least recognize what G was *trying* to do.

"I've got a long way to go, but it's not bad for a start." G slowly said as he examined his handiwork.

"It's looking a lot less gargoyley." Paul said weakly.

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Do you have a minute to look over my report? I want to be sure that it's good enough for this school." Paul said anxiously.

"Sure." G said with a smile at him, then turned back to his illusion and said, "See ya tomorrow, Lex."

As Paul watched, G made a lowering gesture with his arms and the illusory person, Lex, evaporated into nothingness.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"Right here. I've got the report in one document and the illustration attached." Paul hurried to explain.

"That's good. Do you know how to submit it?" G asked as he sat in front of the laptop and started reading.

"No. I hadn't thought about that. Should I print it out or email it to someone?" Paul asked slowly.

"Actually, each teacher has their own way of doing things, so it'd be best if you print it out *and* make sure that you have access to an online copy... maybe email it to yourself so that you can easily forward it."

"My email doesn't allow large attachments and the image file is pretty big." Paul said uncertainly.

"That's alright, we need to get you a secure account anyway. If you're going to be sending spells and summoning diagrams through email, you don't want it where regular people can snoop into it."

"Oh, yeah. I guess I need to do that."

"Let me finish reading this, then we'll see what we need to do to get you set up."

Paul nodded as he watched and waited for G's reaction.

* * * * *

"Wow. The next time I have to write a report, I'm going to get you to help me." G said as he turned to look at Paul.

"It's alright?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah, except for one thing..."

"What'd I miss?"

"You don't have any references. How do you know about all this stuff?"

"I got most of it from the book Mr. Gilbert gave me. The rest I just figured out on my own."

"So you read through it once and you remembered all this?"

"Not word for word, but it made sense when I read it, so I just wrote it down the way I understood it."

"Since it's your first day, I doubt that anyone will have a problem with it. But I know that *my* teachers are always after me to cite my references to back up whatever I'm saying."

"Is there some secret online magic library that I can use?" Paul asked anxiously.

"I know where to find Sorcery information, but I wouldn't know where to start with summoning. Maybe Nazzy or Vinda would know of an online resource."

"Would it be alright to call them? I'd really like for my report to be as good as it can possibly be. You know, first impressions and all that."

"Let me see if they're online." G said, then scooted the chair over to his desktop computer.

Paul watched over his shoulder as G typed in a text message.

"This way, if they're online, they'll be able to share links with you." G explained as he waited for a response.

"So this magic stuff is online where anyone could access it?"

"Not exactly. Any library that contains anything *real* is encrypted and your IP has to be approved before you can access it. I'm pretty sure there's also some magical thing that the tech guys do as another level of security, but I don't know anything about that. All I know is that I have access when I need it."

"I'd really like to understand..." Paul began to say, but stopped when he saw a response to G's text message.

"Nazzy's on. Give me a second to tell him what we need." G said as he started typing.

Paul watched and waited for Nazzy's response.

When it finally came through, it was in the form of a link.

"Nazzy's busy with something else right now, but he said that this site should have what you're looking for." G said as he clicked the link.

G signed into the site, then moved out of the chair so that Paul could take his place.

"If the textbook is listed in here, should I just use that or should I go through some of these others for backup verification?" Paul asked as he searched through a series of thumbnails of cover art.

"If it were me, I'd look at the textbook and see if they cite *their* references, then go and check those out if they're available. That way it doesn't look like you're just copying from the book. But I wouldn't go any deeper than that unless it was for something like a term paper."

"Okay. Here's the book that Mr. Gilbert gave me, so I'd better get to work."

"While you're doing that, I'm going to look through my videos to find us something to watch so that we can relax for a while. I don't know about you, but I feel like I could really use some downtime."

"Sounds good." Paul said as he searched through the book's index for the section that he wanted to reference.

* * * * *

Once Paul had finished with all his citations, he printed off his report.

Soon thereafter he was cuddled up beside G on the couch, watching another bewildering example of anime.

Although it wasn't really that late, the previous day's travel combined with all the excitement of their day at school had taken its toll and the two were soon fast asleep.

* * * * *

Waking up the next morning felt right to Paul. He felt like he was establishing a routine and this particular morning, he felt like he was 'in the groove'.

Eating breakfast, showering and getting ready for school all proceeded at an unhurried pace.

The ride in the school van was enjoyable not only for the fact of grossing out Sandy with an impromptu makeout session, but also for the makeout session itself. Paul appreciated the show of affection and thought that it was an excellent way to start his day.

"What's your first class?"

"Numerology."

"Really? Me too! Who's your teacher?"

"Ms. Ipsum."

"That's so cool! You're in my class!" G said happily, then asked, "Do you need to stop by your locker before we go to class?"

"I don't have one."

"Do you have your schedule with you?"

"Yeah. Here it is."

"Your locker number is up here in the corner. Number 1402."

"Do you know where that is?"

"Yeah. It's not too far from here. Let's go."

* * * * *

"Do you know the combination?"

"No."

"Then how are we supposed to open it?"

G muttered a magical phrase as he made a gesture in front of the locker door.

"Does that tell you the combination?"

"No. It just pops the lock."

"Then can you teach it to me?"

"I can, but I don't think we have enough time right now. I guess that you can either carry your stuff with you or you can put your stuff in your locker and I can do a locking spell. But if I do that it would mean that I'd have to be with you to unlock it when you needed to get to your stuff."

"I'll just carry it with me. It's not that much."

"Once you've been to all your classes, you'll probably have more. Remind me at lunch and I'll teach it to you."

"Yeah. By then I'll probably need to know it."

* * * * *

Paul was somewhat reassured by having G at his side as he walked into Numerology class.

He couldn't help but smile at a paper banner at the front of the room with the numbers 07734 printed on it.

"Ms. Ipsum, this is my brother Paul. He's going to be starting your class today."

"It's nice to meet you Paul. Or would you prefer to be addressed in some other way?" Ms Ipsum asked seriously.

"Paul's fine."

"I received notice that you would be joining my class along with a brief summary of your magical aptitude scores. Based on that, I think that the best way to start you off is with a more advanced student to guide you through the basics. Of course, I'll be available to answer any questions that you may have. And don't be concerned if you notice that you're behind the other students. Everyone is learning at their own pace and things have a way of seeking equilibrium."

Paul hesitantly nodded his acknowledgement of her statement.

"G, since you've advanced beyond the majority of the class, I'd like for you to oversee Paul's introduction to Numerology. Not only will this give Paul the chance to learn from someone that he knows, but you'll also be familiar with what he's working on and be able to help him outside of school hours if necessary."

"I know the basic stuff, but I don't know if I'll know how to teach it. I wouldn't want to screw Paul up on the basics." G said nervously.

"Don't worry about that. I'll be supervising from a distance." Ms Ipsum assured him, then continued, "Besides, you'll have the basic workbooks to give you a structure to follow. Just go through the lessons at whatever pace you're comfortable with, then advance to the next workbook. If you have any doubts or would like recommendations on how to convey a particular concept, just come to me and I'll help you. This might end up being a valuable experience for you."

"Ouch! That's usually how people describe something that's going to suck." G said with a wince.

Ms. Ipsum laughed, then said, "Go to one of the tables at the back of the room and start on the arithmetic primer. Once I've gotten everyone else started on their projects, I'll check in with you."

"I already know arithmetic." Paul quickly interjected.

"Not like this, you don't." G chuckled as he led Paul away.

* * * * *

G went to a shelf of books and took one down.

When he returned to the work table where Paul was sitting, he opened it to the first page and said, "We have seven apples and three oranges. How much fruit do we have?"

"Ten." Paul said slowly, not believing that G was going to start him at such a rudimentary level.

"Right. How did you know that?" G asked slowly.

"Seven plus three is ten... I don't know how else to explain it. It just *is*." Paul said with frustration.

"Yes! Perfect! 'It just *is.*' Remember that. Because *magically* the answer can be a bunch of things all at the same time. Let's say that the apples break down into three different types. There's Red Delicious which weigh on average 100 grams each. The Granny Smith apples each weigh approximately 150 grams. We'll say that the Fuji apples are 125 grams each. Oranges range from eighty to one hundred ninety grams, so for convenience we'll say that our oranges weigh 130 grams each. Later on, we'll calculate the weight after removing peels, cores and seeds, but for now we'll keep it simple. Three Red Delicious, two Granny Smiths, two Fugis and three oranges. How much fruit do we have?'

"We still have ten pieces. But if you want to know the amount of fruit we have by weight I'll need a piece of paper and a minute to figure it out." Paul said honestly.

"Look at this." G said as he touched the tip of his pencil to the large open space on the page of the notebook.

Paul watched and his eyes went wide when he realized what was happening.

"The spell embedded in this page of the workbook allows us to do this." G said as figures started bleeding into being on the page."

"So it's like having a calculator built into the paper?" Paul asked slowly.

"Not exactly. The spell takes the known information and processes it for you. In some ways, it actually makes the math harder than the mundane way of doing it because you have to *understand* what the question is asking and choose the correct spell to solve it. In essence, it makes all your math into word problems. After a while you kinda just start thinking that way."

"What did you end up with on the fruit question?"

"Ten pieces of fruit totalling 1,240 grams, 930 grams of usable fruit product, 690 grams of water weight, three potential magical configurations using the pieces of fruit as spell components and one recipe for a summer fruit salad."

"So rather than do the 'nuts and bolts' calculations, you let the magic do that and focus on selecting the proper magic to produce the information that you're looking for." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Yep. Now you try it. Look around this room and figure out how many people are in here."

"And the spell is already on the workbook and I don't have to do anything to activate it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I can't pull anything over on you." G said tenderly, then explained, "If it worked that way, then a mundane person could use the spell. Of course, that's not the case. Once you have all the parameters of the spell assigned then you need to activate the spell that you know is present and lend it your power."

"And I can do all of that mentally. I don't have to say the spell aloud?" Paul asked to verify.

"Not unless you want to annoy every person in this classroom. When we were in elementary school doing this, the whole class would be reading their spells aloud at the same time and feeding them the variables. It amazes me that the teachers didn't go stark raving mad having to listen to that all day long." G said with a grin.

Paul looked around the room, taking note of all the people present, then he looked at the workbook curiously and became conscious of his magical energy interacting with the spell that was dormant, waiting for him to use it.

"As soon as you're ready, touch the pencil to the paper to set the spell in motion." G said quietly, so as not to distract Paul from his concentration.

Paul picked up the pencil from the table and very deliberately let the point touch inside the blank area on the page.

Just as with when G had done it, words and numbers began to bleed through the paper.

When the page settled into it's final form, G cautiously asked, "What'd you get?"

"Thirteen, including us." Paul said as he looked over the worksheet.

"What else?"

"Six guys, six girls and one woman, Ms Ipsum. Five caucasians, three blacks, two hispanics, two asians and one who the spellbook says is mixed race." Paul said slowly, then looked around to see who the book might be talking about.

"What else?"

"It also breaks us down by our heights, birth dates and BMIs. How does it know all of that?"

"It's magic." G said with a grin.

"So, when I want to calculate how many people are in a room, I'm always going to end up getting a bunch of useless information along with it?"

"At this stage, yes. The basic spells on these workbooks are very general, so they will provide you way more information than you'll be needing. Later on your spells will be more and more specialized so that you can get more specific results and whatever level of precision that you want."

"I get what you're saying, but all of this addition is too basic for me to really see what it's doing. Can you show me something more complex? I understand what you're saying, but I'd like to see a spell that's useful and actually gives you the results that you're expecting."

"Sure." G said, then took the workbook and turned to one of the back pages.

"Are you going to be internally activating the spell on the workbook?"

"Yeah, I guess. The thing is, I've been doing this for so long that it's automatic. I don't even think about what I'm doing or how it works anymore."

"So spellcasting can become a reflex?"

"Yeah." G said then tapped his pencil on the page of the workbook.

Letters, numbers and symbols began to appear, so small that they were almost impossible for Paul to see.

"What does all this mean?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean that you don't know."

G turned and asked more loudly, "Ms. Ipsum? Could you come over here?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Let me pull up a written version of the spell I was using so Ms. Ipsum can see where I went wrong. This should have worked." G said as he placed his pencil back on the worksheet.

Paul watched as a paragraph of text appeared above the absurdly small printing of the result.

"Is there a problem?" Ms Ipsum asked as she approached.

"Yeah. I was just going to show Paul an example of a more advanced spell with a specific result and something went wrong." G said slowly.

"Schrodinger's Cat isn't really a good example to use for someone at a beginner's level." Ms Ipsum said warily.

"I know. But all I was trying to do was to calculate Paul's age in minutes." G said frankly.

"Oh. Yes. I can see what you were trying to do there... That should have worked." Ms. Ipsum said as she carefully read through the spell.

"So what did I do wrong?" G asked as he read through the spell again.

"I'd have to backtrack and verify all the magically retrieved datum to find out where the problem is. For now, try doing the same spell on yourself and see if you can get an answer more in line with what you're expecting."

G tapped his pencil in the work area and Paul noticed the change to one little phrase in the spell.

The results that followed on the page reformed themselves to accommodate the new input.

What, a moment before, had been an incomprehensible formula was now a relatively simple math problem, albeit with an insanely long final answer.

"That's better." Ms Ipsum said with a smile.

"But why did it go wrong before?"

"I'm not sure." Ms Ipsum said simply, then continued, "But I have a feeling that discovering the answer could take quite a bit of time and effort. Once we've been able to get Paul grounded in the basics, we may revisit this question and see where the answers lead us."

"Why does that sound like something really *really* not fun?" G asked cautiously.

Ms Ipsum smiled, then said, "*Discovery* is fun. It's an adventure. If there's one thing that I want you to learn in my class, that's it."

"Yeah. I'm all about discovery except when it means hours of work to find out that an 'ie' should have been an 'ei'." G said frankly.

"We don't have much time left in this class period, why don't you take a few minutes to introduce Paul to the wonder of pi."

"Yeah. I can do that." G said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Pi? Like 3.14159?" Paul asked slowly.

"Yes. Looking at it from one point of view, pi is an irrational and transcendental number that can never be explicitly stated. Looking at it magically, pi is a concept that can easily be used and manipulated."

"Hang on. So if I'm getting what you're saying, by using magic, pi is just another number. Since you don't have to 'calculate' anything with it, you can use it the same way you use the number 2 and not have to worry about decimal places that trail off into infinity."

"Right. Most people have problems with the concept of irrational numbers, but to us they're just the same as any other numbers. When you get into algebra, it still works the same way. 'X' is a number, the same as 2. You don't worry about what it represents, you just accept that it *is*. In fact, you can use exactly the same process with a formula, manipulating it the same as a number."

"But if you use magic to solve problems pretty much the same way that you use a calculator, what's the difference? Why use magic at all?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's all about complexity. When you get used to using magical methods to manipulate numbers and solve problems, you end up being able to find answers that can't be gotten with mundane math."

"That Is, if you know which spells to use."

"Yes. Look at this. Using this very basic spell, the magical expression of pi is plotted to create a circle." G said as he touched the paper with his pencil.

As expected, Paul saw a circle form, along with a mathematical formula quantifying its construction.

"Would that plotting spell work on something besides the paper?"

"Well, *this* spell is on the paper, but if you wanted to I guess you could use a copy of it on something else."

"So in a way, it's kind of like the wizard's light? There's a standard form that almost anyone can use, but you can alter it in a lot of different ways to suit your needs."

"Yeah. I suppose so. I never really had a reason to use it anywhere but on my schoolwork."

"Let me see if I've got this." Paul said slowly, then a glowing circle appeared on the desk in front of him.

"Did you just plug the pi formula into your wizard's light spell?"

"Yeah. It's like a total shortcut compared to what I was doing before."

"But is the math spell going to work along with the other stuff that you were doing?"

"I'm just drawing pictures. I don't think it matters." Paul said honestly, then added, "But I can try it out easily enough."

Before G could even think about objecting, Paul created a complete spell diagram on the floor beside the table.

"You really shouldn't do that in here." G said as he looked around nervously.

"Why not? We're in the 'witch' part of the school, aren't we?"

"Yeah. But it's kind of a rule that we don't practice our specialties outside of our practical application classes."

"What are you doing there?" Ms Ipsum asked as she approached.

"I'm sorry. When G was showing me the spell to plot pi, I thought it might work well in a spell diagram that I've been working on. I didn't realize that I wasn't supposed to do spell diagrams outside of Wizardry class." Paul answered repentantly.

"While it's true that I don't want my students working on projects from other classes during our class time, this relates directly to what you're learning. Why don't you explain what it is that you've done here?"

"Yesterday, I made this diagram for my Wizardry class using wizard's lights. When G showed me the spell to plot pi, I thought I'd incorporate it into my spell diagram to see if the two spells would work together."

"Although people alter Numerology spells to suit their own needs all the time, as far as I know you're the first student to attempt to do so, much less succeed at it, on their first try."

"Yes Ma'am. But it *feels* wrong doing it this way. The *math* doesn't feel right."

"How so?"

"In the spell, 'r' is looked upon as a constant. It feels to me like 'r' should be a sliding scale variable so that it can be easily manipulated. The way I've got it now, I made the circle with a fixed number for 'r', then had to scale everything else to fit inside the circle. That feels like just the opposite of how it should be."

Ms. Ipsum walked over to the table where Paul and G had been working and wrote down a very simple magical phrase before saying, "If you can incorporate this into your plotting spell, it should allow 'r' to be defined as an array of sequential values. The class is nearly over, but I'd be interested to see how it works when you've got it done."

"I think I can do it now." Paul said simply.

Before Ms Ipsum could respond to that, Paul created another diagram on the floor, this one being about half again as big as the previous one. Once the diagram was established, Paul created a circle surrounding it.

"Yeah. That works a lot better." Paul said happily.

"You didn't have to rewrite your spell to incorporate the new statement?" Ms Ipsum asked cautiously.

"I rewrote it in my head." Paul said simply.

"For future reference, I would very much like to be told about what other numerological spells you are able to find useful in your other classwork. I think it would benefit my students to know that there might actually be a *use* for what I'm attempting to teach them."

"Yes ma'am. I'll do that." Paul said with a smile.

"You'd better gather your things and get ready for your next class. The bell's about to ring." Ms Ipsum said before walking away.

"What's your next class?" G asked curiously.

"Um... Alchemy." Paul said as he looked at his schedule.

"Oh, I have Astrology next. But if I remember right, Vinda's got Alchemy second period. Maybe you'll be in her class."

"What do we study in Alchemy?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Changing one thing into another." G said simply then looked up when the bell rang.

Chapter 4

G walked Paul to his next class and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before hurrying away.

Paul was wearing a smile as he walked into the classroom and was happy to see that G had been right and Vinda was already there.

"How's it going? Are you starting to get used to things yet?" Vinda asked when she saw him.

"So far everything's been fine. At least, I don't feel as lost as I did going to regular classes." Paul said honestly.

"Well, Alchemy is one of those classes that sounds a lot more interesting than it really is. You probably won't learn how to turn your enemies into frogs, but there's a chance that you'll learn how to defend yourself from a magical attack."

"Is that something that you really have to worry about?"

"It's not like someone attacks you every day. But it's one of those things that's good to know just in case."

"Well said, Ms Sodhi."

Vinda jumped and turned suddenly.

"I take it that you're the new student I was told about, Mr. Darroch, is it?"

"Yes sir. But you can call me Paul, if you like."

"I prefer to use the proper address in regard to my students. However, I will address you by your first name if you would rather."

"No. That's fine. I just didn't want you to think that I was flaunting who my father is to make it seem like I'm someone important."

"No need to concern yourself about that. I assure you that any judgements made about you will be based solely on your own performance."

"Thank you, sir."

"Forgive me for not saying so sooner, it's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Darroch. My name is Larthur Hind. I will be your Alchemy teacher."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hind."

'Respect.'

'What a concept.'

"Since it's your first day with us, I believe that the most productive way to proceed would be to give you an absurd amount of reading to do and let you work at your

own pace. Ms. Sodhi and I will be available to answer questions, should you have need of us."

Paul hesitantly nodded.

"Give it a try. If it turns out to be too burdensome, simply tell me and we'll try something else to get you caught up with the rest of the class."

"Yes sir. Thank you. I will."

"Take any available seat and I'll bring you a book so that you can get started."

"Yes sir." Paul said, then started to walk away. Vinda motioned to get his attention, then indicated for him to take the seat next to hers.

"That wasn't too bad, was it?" Vinda asked with a smile.

"He seems nice." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. If his class had anything to do with my magical specialty, I wouldn't mind taking it as much. But since it doesn't, it feels like a waste of my time." Vinda said frankly.

"I guess that I'm still too excited about learning that magic is real. I want to learn everything about everything right now."

"That's very good to hear, Mr. Darroch." Mr. Hind said from just over Paul's shoulder, causing him to startle.

"This isn't the book that the rest of the class is using. I feel that this one is better at explaining the foundational magics involved in Alchemy. Once you've gotten a grasp of those concepts, we can ease you into the more advanced studies." Mr. Hind said as he handed the book to Paul.

"Thank you sir." Paul said sincerely as he accepted the book.

"I'll leave you to it, then." Mr. Hind said with a smile before withdrawing.

"Let me know if you need for me to explain anything... well, except for how to stay awake. This stuff is *really* boring." Vinda said frankly.

"I'm actually kind of interested in how everything works." Paul assured her as he opened the book to the first page.

* * * * *

Paul found the book to be well written and engaging. Each new concept was introduced, defined and demonstrated by way of detailed descriptions and sometimes photographic evidence, allowing Paul to incorporate them into his limited view of magic.

Unlike with previous classes, he didn't find anything that he was tempted to try on his own. The spells were of such complexity, yielding such intangible results, that they didn't seem to be worth his time. He was perfectly happy to accept that the reactions and results would be just as the book described them.

When the bell rang, Paul was surprised. He had become consumed by his reading and lost any concept of the passage of time.

"You seemed to really get into it." Vinda said as she got up from her desk.

"Yeah. I just got to the part about changing the states of matter. Using magic to alter something on the molecular level seems like something so incredibly small, and at the same time so unbelievably big that it's hard to wrap my mind around it."

"Yeah. I guess so. You'll probably never look at an ice cube the same way again." Vinda said as she led the way to the door, then thought to ask, "What's your next class?"

"It just says 'Spelling'. I'm guessing that doesn't mean what it does in regular school." Paul said cautiously as he followed along.

"Not really." Vinda chuckled, then happily added, "Nazzy and G are in that class too."

"What will we be doing?"

"Spellcasting. The spells that you use in class don't matter as much as *how* you use them. It's all about your method, style and technique. Sometimes, even if the spell works, you still don't get credit for it because you didn't use the exact right method."

"So everyone in the class is going to be doing magic at the same time?" Paul asked cautiously.

"We usually work together in small groups and take turns. The spells aren't difficult, but you have to do everything just right or you're docked points for it."

"It doesn't sound too bad. At least we'll be doing magic." Paul said honestly.

"G and Nazzy are waiting for us." Vinda said as she gestured at the pair, standing side by side in the hallway ahead of them.

Paul couldn't help but smile when he saw G.

"How's it going?" G asked as he approached.

"So far everything's been great!" Paul answered happily.

"Good. I was afraid that you were going to be overwhelmed like you were before." G said as he pulled Paul into a firm hug.

"Nope. So far I haven't had any problems. Everything's made perfect sense. In fact, it feels like instead of learning new things, I'm getting the answers to questions that I've had for a really long time." Paul said as he was released from the hug and moved to walk at G's side.

"So what's your next class?" G asked curiously.

"Spelling."

"Us too! That's great! I was hoping that we'd all have a class together."

"Do you think we'll be allowed to work together as a group?" Vinda asked as she and Nazzy moved in a little closer to be heard.

"As long as we get our work done and aren't too distracting, Mrs Herdez probably won't care." G said frankly.

"Yeah. If we go in acting like we're already a group, she'll probably just go with it." Nazzy agreed.

"Is there anything I need to know going in?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. We'll tell you everything you need to know. Just follow the instructions exactly and you shouldn't have any problems." G promised.

Before Paul could ask anything more, they walked as a group into the classroom.

* * * * *

"Hi Nicholas. Do you know G, Nazzy and Vinda?" Paul asked the somber boy as they entered the room.

"Did I say or do something to give you the idea that you should talk to me?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

Paul noticed that G immediately bristled at Nicholas' negativity.

"No. But you're my teammate in Wizardry, so I'm not going to pretend like I don't know you when I see you outside of class." Paul explained simply.

"I'd rather you did." Nicholas said firmly.

"Too bad." Paul said with a smile, then continued, "It's not like we're going to hang out, watch movies together or wash each others' hair or something. But if I see you in the hall, I'm going to say 'hi'."

"So there's nothing I can do to make you stop?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"Nope." Paul said with a smile, then conspiratorially added, "But if you said something like, 'hi' in return, I'd probably just leave it at that."

"Hi." Nicholas said immediately.

Paul grinned at the response, then said, "I'll see you in class."

Nicholas watched warily as Paul rejoined Nazzy, Vinda and G.

* * * * *

"What the *hell* was that all about?" G asked as soon as they were away from Nicholas.

"He's on my team in Wizardry." Paul said simply.

"I got that. But he obviously doesn't want to have anything to do with you... or us. What are you trying to do by forcing him to talk to you?"

"I'm just being nice. I sort of get how he feels. Sometimes just knowing that someone cares enough to even make the effort is enough."

"I'll have to take your word for it. I don't get someone like that at all." G said honestly.

'*I believe you.*'

'*You can't even imagine what it's like to feel unloved or insecure.*'

'*That's one reason why you're my Alpha.*'

The class bell rang and G guided Paul to take a seat next to him.

"Those of you who have completed your previous spells, be looking for what you're going to attempt next, so that I can approve it. The rest of you, continue on and let me know when you're ready to demonstrate your completed spells for me." The teacher announced from the front of the room.

G raised his hand and waited for a moment for the teacher to notice.

"Mr. Darroch, do you already have an assignment ready for me to approve?" Mrs. Herdez asked pleasantly.

"No ma'am. But this is my new brother, Paul. He's starting your class today." G quickly explained.

"Oh yes. I had noticed that I'd be getting a new student, but then got distracted. Paul, is it? Tell me, do you have any previous magical training?"

"No ma'am. I just learned that magic was real last week." Paul said uncomfortably.

"Have you had the opportunity to attempt any spells since then?" Mrs. Herdez asked cautiously.

"Just a few little ones." Paul shyly admitted.

"Are they something that you can safely demonstrate here in the classroom?"

"Sure. If you could just step back a little, I could do it right here on the floor." Paul said simply.

Mrs. Herdez took a step back, then said, "Go ahead."

Within a few seconds, Paul's Wizard's Light spell diagram appeared, sharp and clean in every detail.

Mrs. Herdez looked at the diagram, then at Paul skeptically for a moment before asking, "Did you do the wording and gestures in an internal fashion?"

"Yes ma'am. They told me I could do it that way in Wizardry class." Paul quickly explained.

"That may be true in Wizardry, but in *this* class we focus on refining your technique. For that to happen, I need to see the technique that you're using in every detail as well as hear the spoken words." Mrs. Herdez said firmly.

"I should be able to do that. Do you want for me to do it now?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yes. I'm interested to see the spelling you used to get this result."

Paul first dispelled his diagram from the floor, then after a moment to internally calm himself, he held his arms out before him and began making the arcane hand signs while speaking the words of the spell.

Mrs. Herdez listened carefully to his spoken words as she looked curiously from one hand to the other.

Nazzy, Vinda and G all stood silently and watched as Paul continued on and on, speaking every detail of his spell. He verbally described every stretch and skew of the wizard's lights to achieve the desired effect.

With his left hand, Paul was weaving the basic wizard's light spell, creating one little dot of light after another so that he could manipulate them. With his right hand, he was enacting his variation of the pi display, creating the circle that surrounded the entire diagram.

When the diagram was mostly complete, Paul found that his right hand was free, having completed his circle, so he took the opportunity to create seven little balls of flame, to serve as candles surrounding his spell diagram. He was able to work in the spoken invocation of the fire spell as though it had been there all along.

"I didn't realize how much faster that was in my head." Paul admitted as he finally lowered his arms.

"I detected variants of three distinct spells, as well as quite a bit of adaptation. Did you learn to create this diagram somewhere or did you craft it yourself?" Mrs. Herdez asked slowly.

"I learned the wizard's light spell yesterday afternoon and I've been adding things to it ever since. I added the pi formula this morning so that I wouldn't have to draw the circles the hard way." Paul said simply, then noticed that Nicholas, along with most of the rest of the class, had moved in to see his spell diagram.

"Based on what I've just seen here, I believe that I have much to teach you. You seem to have an exceptional aptitude for spellcasting. If we can just refine your technique, you should be able to achieve great things." Mrs. Herdez said seriously.

"Okay." Paul said slowly, then asked, "But what should I be doing right now?"

Mrs. Herdez smiled at the question, then said, "Find out from your group what spell they'll be working on. If you don't understand it, get them to explain it to you. The spells they're using are more advanced than what you've done so far, but there's a chance that you'll be able to manage it. If not, you'll probably learn quite a bit by trying. Take this opportunity to stretch yourself a bit."

"Yes ma'am." Paul said as he waved his hand over the spell diagram at his feet and watched as it vanished.

"Everyone else, back to work! I need some completed spells to evaluate before I can give you any grades." Mrs. Herdez said as she walked back toward the front of the room.

* * * * *

Before Paul could ask about what spell they were working on, a voice from behind him said, "Paul."

He turned and saw Nicholas looking at him nervously.

"Yeah?" Paul asked cautiously.

"What you just did there, was that it? Was that all of how you did the spell diagram?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"Yeah. *That* one, anyway. If you wanted a spell diagram for another realm or locus, you'd be better off starting from scratch. What you just saw me do was the *answer*, it doesn't include how I got the answer." Paul said carefully.

"So you didn't just copy the spell diagram from the book?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"I got the basic form from the book, but the formulae inside the diagram needs to be worked for the time and place that you're in just like it is for the place you're

trying to reach. When I started evaluating the formulae I noticed that the locus was left out. It was easy enough to put it back in, but if you were just copying and pasting, you wouldn't know if what you were trying to do would even work." Paul said thoughtfully.

"But some of those diagrams are written in dead languages. How do you do something like that?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"Well, to be honest, I can understand *some* of the obscure languages. I don't know how. But from what I saw in Numerology today, there are spells that can manipulate numbers, variables and expressions interchangeably. If there are spells that can do that, then there have to be spells that can help you translate ancient languages. This is all new to me, so you'd probably know more about that than I do." Paul said honestly.

"I guess I just thought that I could use the written diagram, kind of like a shortcut, and not have to *understand* what it was doing." Nicholas quietly admitted.

"That could work." Paul easily admitted, then added, "But it's also the perfect way to fall into someone else's trap."

"Nicholas, would you like to join our group and work with us?" Vinda asked as she approached Paul's side.

"No." Nicholas immediately barked, then once he'd realized what he'd just done, he said more quietly, "No, thank you."

"We can talk more about it in Wizardry class if you want to." Paul said assuringly.

Nicholas looked uncertain about what he was agreeing to, but finally nodded.

* * * * *

"So, what are we doing?" Paul asked curiously.

"Actually, we were all three able to complete our spell in our last class, so today we're picking the next one we're going to try to do." G said simply.

"No more stink bombs." Vinda said firmly.

"It wasn't a stink bomb, it was an aura manipulation." Nazzy said informatively.

"Yeah. You manipulated my aura into a stink bomb." Vinda countered.

"Here's a nice levitation spell." G said as he leafed through a book.

"Can any of us use it?" Nazzy asked, obviously already knowing the answer.

"No. You have to be proficient in Thaumaturgy and none of us are." G said as he continued to flip pages.

"How about shapeshifting? We all have magical forms, so that might be enough of a magical connection to allow us to be able to do... something." Vinda said as she looked at a different book.

"What did you have in mind?" G asked curiously.

"The one I'm looking at is a mermaid spell." Vinda said slowly as she read through it.

"No." G said firmly.

Vinda looked up from her book curiously.

"There are certain parts of my lower body that I don't want to have replaced by a fish. Thank you very much."

"You want to protect your guppy. Got it." Vinda said with a grin as she turned the page.

"So, we can just pick any spell from any discipline to work on in here?" Paul asked Nazzy curiously.

"Yeah, pretty much. We can *pick* anything we want. But Mrs. Herdez has to approve our choice before we're allowed to work on it." Nazzy said as he leaned forward to read over Vinda's shoulder.

"There was this spell in my numerology book that looked interesting, it was kind of a 3D graphing thing. Could I do something like that?" Paul asked curiously.

"We can take a look at it, but one thing to keep in mind is that if the spell isn't very complicated, Mrs. Herdez probably won't allow it. She wants for every spell to be cast perfectly AND for each spell to be a challenge for us." Nazzy said honestly.

Paul opened his backpack and took out his numerology workbook.

After flipping through a few pages, he found the page that he was looking for. It was an exercise that did a simple 3D plot. As Paul looked at the details of the spell, he realized the potential to manipulate the plotting parameters.

"Is it okay if I try something, I mean, like magic, or do I need to have permission before I do anything like that?" Paul asked cautiously.

"What did you have in mind?" Nazzy asked as he turned his full attention to Paul.

"I was just thinking that if I combine the 3D plotting from this numerology worksheet with my wizard's light that I could probably come up with something interesting. But I can't be sure that it's going to work until I try combining them." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Sometimes it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission." Nazzy said with a grin.

"What?"

"Just do it. The worst that will happen is Mrs. Herdez will ask you not to do it again." Nazzy assured him.

"Oh. Okay." Paul said, then concentrated while internally weaving the hand signs for all the spells simultaneously.

Right in front of Paul, a pillar of stone emerged from the floor, stopping at about belly height. On the 'tabletop', a complex landscape appeared, complete with a lake, forest and a castle.

Admittedly, the landscape appeared to be somewhat 'pixelated', due to it being made entirely out of little cubes, but the overall structure was definitely recognizable.

"Okay. How did you do that?" Vinda asked as she walked up to the pillar.

"With a spell."

"Which spell?"

"Um, wizard's light, the 3D plotter spell from numerology, and then I threw in some of the 'states of matter' manipulations that I read about in Alchemy." Paul said as he looked over his handiwork.

"It blows me away how much detail you're able to create." G said as he cautiously reached forward to touch the top of one of the little trees.

"I think that I do it in a completely different way from you. Making something that seems 'unreal' would probably be more of a challenge for me." Paul said frankly.

"It's solid!" G said with astonishment.

"Yeah." Paul said slowly.

"I thought you made an illusion, but you actually *created* this thing?!" G asked in wonder.

"No. Not really." Paul admitted, then explained, "It's only *real* for as long as I keep the spell going. Once I dispel it, the air that I turned solid will go back to being a gas."

"From all the detail on this thing, it would probably take more than one class period for you to cast it... I mean, out loud with all the gestures and diagrams and everything." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. But I thought that, if we're allowed to do it, each of us could take one part and we could all cast it together... isn't that what you do in here?" Paul finished uncertainly.

"We usually all work on casting the same spell seperately." Vinda responded.

"Oh. I misunderstood what you were talking about." Paul said as he raised his hand toward his construct.

"No. Wait! Don't get rid of it yet!" G urged him.

Paul lowered his hand and looked at G curiously.

"Go through this with us, one piece at a time. Maybe there's a way that the four of us can cast this spell together." G said seriously.

"Remember, I've only been here one day. None of these spells are hard at all. I've just been mixing and matching them so that they can work together to do new things." Paul said as he looked from person to person.

G had most of his attention on the little landscape and he couldn't seem to get over the fact that it was solid. He experimentally touched the water, then quickly withdrew his hand as he said, "It's wet!"

"It's water." Paul said flatly, then added, "Well, *technically* it's air, but I overrode its natural properties to make it think that it's water while I'm using it."

"Paul, I don't think this is as simple a thing as you think it is." Nazzy said frankly.

"Before we do anything else, we need to ask Mrs. Herdez if we can even attempt to do this spell together. If she says 'no', then we're going to have to come up with something else." Vinda interjected.

"I'll go get her." G said decisively before there could be any further discussion of the matter.

* * * * *

"Well, what do we have here?" Mrs. Herdez asked as she approached.

"Paul came up with this... construct and he was thinking that if we do all the different spells that make it, we could do it as a group." G explained.

"Is this sorcery?" Mrs. Herdez asked slowly.

"No. It's completely real. The water is even wet." G said with a smile.

Mrs. Herdez cautiously touched the water of the lake, then let her fingers drag across the tops of a few of the trees before asking, "So you were able to create a solid object from nothing?"

"No ma'am. I created the images using wizard's lights combined with the plotting spell from numerology, then I gave them substance by using the same coordinates with an alchemy spell to cause air to temporarily take another form." Paul said slowly.

"And you're proposing that each of you take a different component of the spell to recreate this, using the long form spoken spell, hand manipulations and written diagrams?" Mrs. Herdez asked cautiously.

"Yes. And I could probably even do a little sorcery overlay to even out the look of it, if you'd allow it." G interjected.

"Do you think that you'll be able to do the completed spell within one class period?" Mrs. Herdez asked thoughtfully.

"We should be able to. From the way that Paul explained it, none of the spells are that hard to do on their own. The trick is going to be to coordinate all our different magics to work together at the same time." Vinda said seriously.

"I'm interested to see what you come up with. I'll allow it. But I'm going to want every single detail of what all four of you are doing written down. If you can get this to work, I'll submit your completed report to the department head for his evaluation." Mrs. Herdez said seriously.

"This might take us a couple days. Is that okay?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"If you can manage it, I'd like to see your completed project during our class on Friday. Do you think that will be enough time?" Mrs. Herdez asked hopefully.

"I think so." Vinda said uncertainly, then looked to G and Nazzy as she said, "We're probably going to have to work on this outside of class."

"No problem for me." Nazzy said easily.

"We can do it at my house." G said simply.

"Well then, I suppose that you'd better get to it. You've taken on quite a project." Mrs. Herdez said before walking away.

'*When will I ever learn to keep my big mouth shut?*'

'*Oh well, if we can pull this off it's going to be amazing.*'

"Paul, I'm going to need for you to write down *everything* before you forget it." Vinda said firmly.

"Do you have some paper?" Paul asked simply as he opened his backpack.

"Yes. Here." Vinda said as she handed him a spiral bound notebook.

Paul sat down at a desk, then opened the notebook to the first blank page. He thought for a moment, then touched the pencil to the paper.

Words immediately began filling the page, giving the spoken words of the Wizard's Light spell. He turned the page and touched the paper with his pencil. The hand-

signs and gestures were both illustrated and described in great detail in writing almost too small to read.

When he went to the next page, he filled it with the manipulations of the Wizard's Light spell to create the desired color and texture effects.

Nazzy, Vinda and G watched with surprise as Paul continued to fill page after page with detailed text and diagrams.

"When did you learn how to do that?" Nazzy finally asked.

"Do what?" Paul asked as he continued.

"How do you write like that?"

"I learned it this morning, in Numerology class. It's how the workbook lets you fill in the answers." Paul said absently as he filled page after page with details about the Numerology plotting spell. Once that was done, he started on the specific coordinates for the 'construct'.

"You learned this in *one* class?" Nazzy asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah. I just wanted to know how the writing spell worked, so I deconstructed it. It took, like, a minute." Paul said absently, then turned the page again.

"What's that?" Vinda asked curiously.

"Alchemy. It's how I make the whole thing solid... or liquid, depending on what it's supposed to be." Paul said frankly.

"I always thought of Alchemy being mostly theoretical. I mean, we'd do magical manipulations of things, just to show that it*could* be done, but I never really had any reason to use it for anything." Nazzy said honestly.

"I don't know how useful *this* is, but it seemed like it would be a good thing to include in this project." Paul said as he closed the notebook and handed it to Vinda.

"It's all in here?" Vinda asked as she opened the notebook to see for herself.

"Yeah. Well, except for whatever G comes up with for an overlay illusion. I don't know how his magic works, but he can probably use the same coordinates that I did to create the original construct. The three of us can create the 'bones' of the construct and G can give it a 'skin'." Paul said with a smile at him.

"Paul, what part do you want to focus on? To do this right, we're each going to be working on different things so we'll be dividing the work four ways." Vinda asked as she skimmed over what he had written.

"Well, G's going to have to work on the skin, I'm assuming that he's the only one who can do that. So we'll actually be dividing it three ways." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Right. One of us will do the Numerology plot, another will do the Wizard's Light effects and the last will do the Alchemy." Vinda said slowly.

"Well, even though the spells themselves aren't too hard, it sounds to me like neither of you are too comfortable with the matter manipulation, so I can do that if you want... I mean, since I've already done it." Paul said cautiously.

"I think any of us could do it using this spell, but since you seem to have the best grasp of *how* to manipulate the matter, it's probably best if you do it. Nazzy and I will split the rest between us. Both of us are better than average at Wizardry and Basic magic." Vinda said decisively.

"This class is almost over, when do you want for us to get together to work on it?" G asked curiously.

"I think that all of us are going to need to study our spells on our own before we're ready to try them together. How about tomorrow night? That way, if we run into any problems or have to do any fine tuning, we can do that on Thursday before we have to present it on Friday." Vinda asked cautiously, looking to see if anyone had a problem with the plan.

"Sounds good to me." Paul said simply.

"Yeah. That'll give me enough time to tweak the illusion." G said thoughtfully.

"Remember that every tweak you make will have to be documented. We want it to be nice, but we're going to have to present this in front of Mrs. Herdez. Don't make it so complicated that we can't do it in the allotted time." Vinda warned him.

"Paul, you might want to put that away." Nazzy said as he gestured toward the pillar that they were standing around.

The 'construct' suddenly vanished, leaving nothing in its wake. Paul hadn't used so much as a word or gesture to dispel it. He simply withdrew the power that was fueling the spell and it collapsed in on itself.

"Do you need for me to make copies of this for everyone?" Vinda asked as she held up the notebook.

"We're probably going to be making changes before this is in its final form. Why don't you keep it so we won't have lots of out-of-date copies floating around?" G asked seriously.

"Yeah. If you need anything from the master copy, just let me know."

"Sounds good. And if you need to make any changes to the master copy, just keep notes about it and we'll incorporate them when we get together." G agreed.

The bell ringing caused them all to look up.

"What's your next class, Paul?" G quickly asked as he gathered his things.

"My schedule just says 'Basic'."

"Basic magic. You should enjoy that one. You'll learn lots of spells that are useful in everyday life." Vinda said with a smile at him.

"Are any of you in that class with me?"

"I'm in my 'related' Sorcery class next." G said regretfully.

"I've got Astrology." Vinda said sourly.

"Potions." Nazzy said unenthusiastically.

G put an arm around Paul and gave him a firm hug as he said, "Have fun. We'll see you at lunch."

Paul was about to respond, but was too slow. G moved in and gave Paul a quick, firm kiss before dashing away.

It took a moment for Paul to get his bearings, but he finally found his class schedule and set off in search of his next classroom.

* * * * *

Paul walked into the classroom and looked around.

Unlike most of the other rooms that he had visited, this one seemed to be unusually 'cluttered'. There were benches and shelves around the room and all of them seemed to be filled to overflowing with little knick-knacks and random junk.

The teacher was sitting at her desk at the front of the room, engrossed in her reading.

Paul timidly approached and waited for her to acknowledge him.

The other students were entering the room, remaining mostly quiet as they made their way to their desks.

Finally, the woman looked up at Paul and when she saw him, she smiled before saying, "You must be Paul Darroch."

The only word that Paul could think of to describe the woman was 'grandmotherly'.

"Yes ma'am." Paul quietly responded.

"Well, let's see... I'm Mrs. Cualla. This is Basic Magic. In this class you'll be learning about charms, hexes, personal spells, wards and household magics."

"I just learned about magic being real last week. So everything's new to me."

"Then this is a good class for you. Unlike most other classes, there isn't a 'learning curve' in this one. One lesson typically doesn't build on the previous one. Those who

prove to be adept at Basic Magic may advance to the point where they can create their own charms, but many won't. Instead, they'll acquire the charms that prove to be useful to them in their daily lives. Along the way you'll also be introduced to spells that every witch should know, to make your daily lives easier."

Paul remembered G's 'chicken foot' charm at home and nodded that he understood.

"Tell me, before you came to your new understanding about magic, what did you think charms were?" Mrs. Cualla asked curiously.

"I guess I thought that a rabbit's foot or a four leaf clover were supposed to bring you good luck. I didn't believe in it. But I hadn't thought about it much beyond that."

Mrs. Cualla smiled, then said, "Yes, those are some of the classics. The fact of the matter is, those things actually *do* exist. There are magically enchanted items that hold power."

Paul cautiously nodded that he was following what she was saying.

"Here. Let me give you this." Mrs. Cualla said as she picked up a small silver spider from her desk and handed it to him.

Paul accepted it and looked at it carefully.

"What do you think that does?" Mrs. Cualla asked curiously.

"It's a protection spell... you put it over a crib or give it to a little kid to wear on a necklace or as a charm for their charm bracelet and it keeps away sickness and evil spells." Paul said slowly.

Mrs. Cualla chuckled, then said, "It's a wonder that you didn't know about magic already if you can read it so clearly now, after only a week."

"I guess it's like the ward on the hallway to this part of the school, it was always there and I always could have seen it, but I just never looked before." Paul said honestly.

"Well, since you seem to have the ability to 'read' the spells on enchanted items, there's no point in you going through an endless list of enchanted items to learn their intended purposes. We have another student in this class who is much like you. He's only recently become aware of magic and he also has the ability to read the spells on enchanted items. I think that I'll put the two of you together so that you can work on enchanting some items of your own."

"Even though I can see the spell on this charm, I wouldn't know how to cast it. Will I be learning that?" Paul asked hesitantly.

"This one is a bit complex for a beginner, it might take some time before you're ready to take on a project of this scale."

"As long as I can cast it in the next six or seven months, it should be fine. I'd like to make a charm like this for my little brother or sister when they're born." Paul said honestly.

Mrs. Cualla smiled tenderly at Paul, then said, "I promise, if you haven't developed the skill by then, I'd be honored to enchant the item for you myself."

"Thank you, ma'am." Paul said gratefully.

"Come along then, let me introduce you to your class partner and get you two started on a project." Mrs. Cualla said as she slowly got up from her chair.

* * * * *

"Filipe, how are you doing today?" Mrs. Cualla asked as they approached.

"Not very well, Mrs. Cualla. The spell that I'm wanting to use is no problem, but I can't get it to bind to the charm." The younger looking hispanic boy said with frustration.

"Go ahead and show me what you're doing and I'll see if I can give you any advice." Mrs. Cualla said seriously.

Paul watched as Filipe placed a piece of paper on his desk with a spell diagram drawn on it. In the center of the diagram, he placed a small piece of plastic shaped to look like a 'corn on the cob'.

Felipe then touched the five points around the spell diagram as he said an incantation which Paul could tell was intended to enchant the little charm to hold a spell of prosperity for whomever holds it.

Mrs. Cualla slowly nodded at Filipe's casting of the spell, then turned to Paul and asked, "Can you see what he's doing?"

"Sort of. The prosperity spell is simple enough, but the binding seems to be off. It's like there's nothing balancing the equation. For what is given, something must also be taken. Without that, the spell won't stick." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Very well said." Mrs. Cualla said with a smile, then added, "This is probably the main reason that every witch alive doesn't have a dozen or so charms hanging off of them, automatically granting them every blessing under the sun."

"How can I get it to bind?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"Filipe, this is Paul. He just learned about magic last week and he can also read the spells bound within enchanted objects. I'd like for you two to work together. You'll

have the entire magic library at your disposal to discover a way to make your binding complete."

Filipe and Paul shared a withering look at the monumental task before them.

"No blood sacrifices!" Mrs. Cualla said firmly before walking away to talk to another group.

* * * * *

"Hi. I'm Paul."

"Filipe."

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"I'm fifteen. Mrs. Cualla said that you just learned about magic too. How are you handling it?"

"Okay, I guess. My *abuela* used to tell me stories about witches and magic. I grew up thinking that they were like fairy tales, but I'm finding out that everything she told me was true."

"Was she a witch?"

"I think so. I don't remember her doing any magic, but people used to come to her for things and now that I look back on it, not everything they asked for was exactly *normal*."

"My mom never said a word to me about magic. I'm starting out from nothing."

"Well, then I guess there's only one way to go." Filipe said with an encouraging smile.

'*Okay.*'

'*Kindred spirit.*'

'*Friendly guy.*'

'*Positive and Encouraging.*'

'*We have all the necessary components on hand to accomplish great things.*'

"I guess so. Do you have any idea of where we should start looking for an answer on how to bind your spell to the charm?"

"Not really. I've only read through a few of the books in here, but they were mostly about how to use existing charms, not how to enchant new ones."

"Well, if these spells are anything like the others that I've been reading, they're probably hiding the most useful parts of them on purpose so that lazy people won't

misuse them." Paul said as he walked to one of the bookcases surrounding the room to browse through the titles.

"So you think that they're making them difficult to understand on purpose?"

"Yeah. In my Wizardry class, they actually leave parts of the spells out so that someone who doesn't know what they're doing won't accidentally summon something that they can't control." Paul said frankly.

"You're in Wizardry?"

"Yeah. What's your specialty?"

"Thaumaturgy."

"What's that?"

"Basically, it's magic that binds two related things together so that when you act on one, there is a reaction in the other. I think voodoo dolls are the easiest example to understand... even though I can't do that... yet."

"I don't get it."

"If I have a little basket that will fit in the palm of my hand, and another basket big enough for a person to fit inside, I can raise the basket in my hand two inches and the basket holding the person will raise two feet."

"I bet that there's a lot more to it than that. Nothing's *that* simple and there's always a price to pay."

"True. The spells are really long and complicated and you have to do them just right every single time. Once you get the spell right, then you have to fuel the spell with something, sometimes that's your own personal magical energy."

"It sounds like even a simple little job could wipe you out."

"Yeah. And sometimes, if the spell gets broken in the middle of casting it, there's a backlash that can knock you out for days."

"That sounds nasty."

"It is. From what I hear, there isn't much of a use for Thaumaturgy in the world anymore. I still need to learn how to use my abilities the best that I can, but I can't depend on being able to get a job using it when I'm grown up. That's why I'm working so hard to try and learn the charms and stuff."

"I haven't really thought too much about what I'll do with my magic when I grow up. So far, I've just been reacting to what's been happening around me."

"When my parents realized that I had magical abilities, they checked with some of my *abuela*'s old friends to find a place where I could learn how to use my witchcraft.

I had to move here, on my own, all the way from New Mexico. I'm staying with a host family while I'm here."

"Oh wow! I never realized just how good I had it. Are your host family nice? Do they treat you alright?"

"Yes. They're fine. Their daughter, Stevie, is your age. She looks at me kind of like the little brother that she always wanted. Besides her treating me like I'm a little kid, everything's fine."

"If it starts not being fine for some reason, let me know. I'm still getting settled in with my new step-dad and step-brother, so I know how it feels to be overwhelmed by a lot of 'new' all at once."

"Thanks. It'll be good to know that there's someone I can talk to who understands."

"I can give you my email address, but don't send me anything to do with magic in it. I'm still working on getting a magically secure email account."

Filipe patted his pockets and took out a folded piece of paper from his left hip pocket.

Paul touched his fingertip to the paper and his email address appeared, written in his own handwriting.

"How'd you do that?" Filipe asked as he looked at the paper.

"I'll show you the spell once we've picked out some books."

Filipe nodded, then began to look through the book titles in earnest.

* * * * *

According to Paul's research, while creating the charm wasn't 'impossible', it was somewhat unlikely.

The prosperity spell required a lot of magic to fuel it, and it would need a continuous supply of magic to keep it functioning. Although such things were possible, the magic involved was uncomfortably high and decidedly dark.

Paul now understood why Mrs. Cualla had made a point of saying 'No Blood Sacrifices'.

A captured life force '*could*' fuel the spell, but even so, the duration of the charm would still leave a lot to be desired.

"I want to say that it's impossible, but I know that charms like that exist. There's got to be a way to make the enchantment stick, but I just can't see how it works." Filipe said with frustration.

"Maybe that's what we're missing." Paul said in realization.

"What's that?"

"Both of us can *read* enchantments. Maybe the answer's not in the books but in the enchanted items around us. Maybe there's a clue in there of how they made the magic bind to the item."

"I've tried that. I couldn't see anything."

"Have you tried it with your spell diagram? Maybe the diagram that you use to *bind* will also *unbind*."

"If you'll grab us an active charm, I'll get the diagram." Filipe said with renewed energy.

Paul walked to one of the shelves and looked at the collection of seemingly random and useless items.

He took down one that seemed to be of adequate power for them to be able to read, but also handle safely.

* * * * *

"I only have the one spell diagram." Filipe said apologetically as he placed it between them.

"No problem. Here, try this snowglobe." Paul said as he handed the object to Filipe.

"We won't be able to test it out. The spell on it only affects animals, like cats and dogs."

"We don't need to test it. The spell just looked so simple and straightforward that it seemed reasonable to assume that the binding would be too. Open your spell diagram and see if you can get a peek at what's holding the spell to the snowglobe."

Filipe placed the snowglobe in the center of the spell diagram, then touched each point of the diagram as he spoke the invocation.

Paul watched carefully for any sign of what was keeping the spell in place.

"Oh. Yeah. We're not doing that." Filipe said slowly as he backed away from the snowglobe.

Before Filipe had closed the spell, Paul was able to catch a glimpse of what Filipe had seen.

The snowglobe was indeed being fueled by a life force, or more precisely, three life forces, which were sacrificed and captured at the moment of death.

"That's just sick." Filipe said with disgust.

"Yeah." Paul said, then despite his revulsion, picked up the snowglobe and walked back across the room to put it back in its original place.

* * * * *

After the snowglobe, neither had any desire to 'peek' into the spell on another charmed item. Instead, they went back to their books with renewed dedication.

"Okay. Here's one that binds the magic with a candle's flame." Filipe said distantly as he continued to read.

"What's the spell that's being bound?"

"Positive energy."

"Okay. That sounds promising. What is the charm that it's being bound to?"

"White quartz."

"Yeah. I see how that could work. The quartz can act like a battery, storing the energy. As far as the positivity... can energy *be* positive? Isn't energy just energy?"

"I don't know. The spell says all kinds of stuff about purity and light, but I can't see where it actually *does* anything."

"So basically you can magically use the candle's flame to 'charge' the thing, but after that, the person holding it would have to believe that the magic is something positive to get it to do what they want it to."

"So it's all in their head?"

"No. There *is* energy stored. It's not hard to do that part. But the spell is a cheat because it makes someone think that they've got magic to make them happy or upbeat and all they've really got is a little psychic energy boost. If they're pissed off, they could tap into that same energy to fuel their rage. It wouldn't do anything to calm them."

"Yeah. And the little bit of energy that it could store wouldn't be enough to do much of anything anyway. You sure couldn't use it to power a prosperity spell."

"Maybe not, but you said that Thaumaturgy links one thing to another with an external source of power to fuel it, right?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"How do you bind the power to your linked objects?"

"There's a couple spells that I've come across for that. But they draw on kinetic energy or flame to fuel the spell. As soon as the power source is withdrawn, the spell ends."

"Okay. I get that. But if you can take kinetic energy and convert it to magical energy to fuel a spell, couldn't you do the same with the energy stored in a battery... or a crystal?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure of how you would do it, but it sounds like it could work."

"If we could find a source of enduring energy like that and convert it to fuel the prosperity spell, then maybe we could get it to stick. I mean, it looks to me like what our problem has been is that the energy we've been using is too weak to maintain a binding."

"Does that mean that I'd have to carry a battery around with me?"

"No. You'd take the properties and potentials of the battery and transfer that along with the energy into your charm."

"I don't know how we'd do that."

"I don't know either. But it seems like it should be able to work. We're almost out of time for this class. Do you think that you'll be able to get some batteries before the next time we meet?"

"Yes. That shouldn't be a problem. Our next Basic class is on Thursday."

"Okay. Between now and then I'm going to dig into my Alchemy textbook and see what I can come up with to magically transfer inherent properties from one thing to another. If I can manage that, then we *might* be able to bind the spell, since we'll have a way of fueling it."

The bell ringing caused them both to look up.

"Do you have someone to sit with at lunch?"

"Yeah. I sit with Stevie and her friends. I know it sounds kind of lame, but I really don't mind. It's kind of nice that she wants to include me."

"Okay. Well, if she starts getting boring, you're welcome to come over and sit with us. Just watch out what you say if you do. We have a friend who sometimes sits with us who's not a witch."

"I'll remember." Filipe assured him, then said, "I'll see you Thursday."

"Yeah. See you then."

* * * * *

"Is everything still alright?" G asked as he put an arm around Paul.

"Yeah. It's all great." Paul said honestly.

"So it's not like it was before, where you didn't even understand the questions they were asking?"

"No. I'm understanding things just fine. Instead of memorizing a bunch of crap that I'll probably never need to know, I've been *discovering* things and... I guess, learning..." Paul trailed off in wonder, then muttered, "I never saw *that* coming."

G laughed, then used his free arm to wave at Nazzy and Vinda who were approaching.

"How was Basic Magic? Did you get started learning about the endless selection of charms?" Vinda asked with a smile.

"No. Mrs. Cualla said that I could skip that. She wants me to work on 'making' charms for right now. From what she was saying, she's going to be teaching us some 'daily use' spells, too." Paul said honestly.

"Really? I've been doing this *forever* and I still haven't made a charm."

"Yeah. I guess that I can somehow 'read' the spell that's embedded in the charm, so she said that it would be kinda pointless for me to learn about what all the different charms can do when I can just tell by looking at them."

"But she's having you *make* charms?"

"I haven't made anything yet, but I get the feeling that that's what she's going to have me doing once I've figured out how it all works."

"New guy. First day in her class and she has him making charms... I'll never figure this place out." Vinda muttered with a shake of her head.

"Real world." Nazzy said as they stepped out of one hallway into a much larger one.

"Thanks Naz." G said with a grin at him.

"Paul! I didn't know if you were here today. I didn't see you in any of the classes." Curtis said as he hurriedly approached.

"Yeah. I guess we didn't get scheduled to have any classes together." Paul said honestly.

"So how are you doing? Is the new class schedule working better for you?"

"Oh yeah. It's great. My only problem so far has been that I can't keep my big mouth shut and I'm always volunteering to take on more work." Paul said with a self-deprecating grin.

"I don't have to worry about that. I might as well be invisible." Curtis said frankly.

"I know how that is. I think I went through one whole school year without ever talking to anyone... of course, the year after that, I was in a school where everyone was getting up in my face all the time and wouldn't shut up. It's hard to find a good balance."

Curtis looked at the rest of their group, then quietly said, "Sorry for intruding. I was just worried that Paul might not be here today."

"It's fine. Remember, we invited you to join us yesterday." G assured him.

"Yeah. And before you caught up to us, we were interrogating Paul about his day. We were all worried about how he was going to handle taking all new classes." Nazzy explained.

Before Curtis could respond, they reached the cafeteria line and started taking trays.

* * * * *

Once they were all sitting, Paul noticed a concerned look on Curtis' face.

"What's wrong?"

"Those guys are staring at us." Curtis said anxiously.

Paul glanced where Curtis was looking and saw four boys about their same age looking back at him.

"What do you suppose that's all about?" Paul asked curiously.

"They don't think that I should be sitting with you." Curtis said honestly.

"What? Do they want you to sit with them?"

"No. They just think that a black guy should only sit with other black guys... even though I'm not friends with any of them."

"How 1950's of them." Nazzy said with a smirk.

"What is this that we're eating?" Paul asked as he looked at the food on his plate.

"Mushroom risotto, I think." G said as he poked it with his fork.

"It's good. I don't think I've ever had it before." Paul said before taking another bite.

"Curtis, you may have noticed that I'm not exactly lily white." Vinda said seriously, then continued, "If you need any help dealing with people who can't see past your race, let me know."

"Thanks. I usually don't even think about it until something like this happens to remind me." Curtis admitted shyly.

"Yeah. I think we're all like that." Nazzy said easily.

Paul nodded his agreement before taking another bite of his food.

"So are you guys all in the same classes?" Curtis asked curiously.

"We have one class together. We cross each other's' paths most of the rest of the day." G said easily.

"It's funny that I don't see any of you in any of my classes. What are the odds?" Curtis asked slowly.

"I think it probably has to do with you being relatively new to the school. Those of us who've been here since the beginning have been... trained... I guess, to be what they expect us to be, so they have classes that reinforce and build on what they've taught us all along. For someone like you or Paul, they have to make up for whatever you didn't get taught at your old schools, so you get put on a different course track." G said thoughtfully.

"Or maybe it's just because this is a big school with lots of little classes." Nazzy interjected.

"It could be that, too." G easily accepted.

"Do you guys have anything going on after school?"

"Since we all take vans to get home, we can't really hang around or anything." Vinda said honestly.

"Yeah. And besides that, you remember that thing about me and my big mouth? I've volunteered for so much extra stuff that I'll be lucky to have enough time to eat and sleep before this weekend." Paul said unenthusiastically.

"Did you volunteer for extra credit or something?" Curtis asked curiously.

"No. It's nothing like that. I think the teachers just want to get a handle on what I do and don't already know, so they're having me do extra projects. I'm guessing that I'll get some kind of a grade or extra-credit or something out of it, but that's not why I'm doing it. Doing these things helps to show me what I need to focus on most." Paul said thoughtfully.

"I guess that's a smart way of doing it. I'm kind of used to just waiting around for someone to tell me what I need to do to get the grade, then doing it." Curtis said frankly.

"Whatever works best for you." G said to Curtis with a grin, then continued, "But I think Paul's proactive approach works best for the situation that he's in, starting while the school year's already in progress."

"Yeah. There's already a lesson plan in place for the rest of us, but Paul's trying to jump in, right in the middle of things. So he's going to have to sort a few things out on his own before he'll be able to fit into the groove with the rest of us." Nazzy said consideringly.

"Speaking of which, it's almost that time." Vinda said as she gestured toward the clock.

"Ungh. English Lit." Curtis groaned.

"Sitting here complaining isn't going to make anything better." Vinda told him sympathetically.

"I know. But it's boring and it sucks. I feel like I should at least be able to whine about it." Curtis responded.

"That's true. Go ahead. We can wait for you to finish if you need us to." G said as he started gathering things onto his tray.

Curtis broke into an unwilling smile, then said, "It's okay. I don't need to anymore. But thanks."

"Have a good day Curtis. Maybe we'll see you out at the vans after school." Vinda said as she stood.

"Yeah. I'll see you then." Curtis said as he began to gather his dishes.

"Are you okay?" Paul asked as he waited for Curtis to be ready to go.

"Yeah. I guess I just feel like I'm doing something wrong by hanging out with you guys." Curtis said frankly.

"I don't know what to tell you except that Nazzy was right. People who are hung up on race have their thinking stuck back in the 1950's. If me and my friends have to divide people into groups at all, we mostly look at who's on their way up and who's on their way down, then we decide who we want to be associated with. A loser is a loser, regardless of race." Paul said frankly.

"Does that mean that by accepting me, you guys are saying that you don't think that I'm a loser?" Curtis asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That's exactly what it means." Paul said simply.

"Thanks." Curtis said sincerely.

"It goes both ways." Paul added, "By hanging out with us you're saying to everyone that you think we're worth something."

"Nobody cares what I think."

"We do." Paul said as he led the way to the drop off window, then added, "And I think you care what we think too, or you wouldn't have accepted the invitation to sit with us."

"Yeah. I just wish that things didn't have to be so complicated." Curtis said regretfully.

"Welcome to high school." Paul said with a grin.

"The most *wonderful* time of your life." Curtis said with a reluctant smile, then added, "At least, according to my parents."

"Yeah. Depressing, isn't it? It's their way of telling you that things only get worse from here on out." Paul said as he set down his tray.

"It gets worse?" Curtis whimpered.

"Only if you let it." Paul assured him and waited for Curtis to be finished at the drop off window.

Chapter 5

Nazzy and Vinda were waiting for Paul just inside the 'magic' hallway. Paul was disappointed that G wasn't waiting there too, but understood that G needed to be on his way to his Sorcery class.

"Are you ready for Wizardry?" Nazzy asked as Paul approached.

"I'm as ready as I can be." Paul said honestly.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Vinda asked curiously.

"I've written all that I can on my Wizardry report, but I need to check with Nicholas to see if he's done his part."

"So it's not ready to submit?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"No. Besides that, I've got to make one little change since I found a better way to draw the circle."

"If you need to use a computer, you'd better jump on as soon as we get into the main classroom. They usually go quick." Nazzy said frankly.

"I have to talk to Nicholas first. If he's not ready with his part, then there's no need for me to rush on mine."

"That's the downside of team projects. If you've got one person who doesn't pull their weight, the whole team suffers because of it."

"Yeah. Tell me about it." Paul muttered and seemed to be lost in thought.

* * * * *

When they walked into the main classroom, Paul noticed that all the computers had already been claimed.

"We'll see you after class." Vinda said quietly before hurrying away to join the rest of her team.

Paul looked around and spotted Amelia and Nicholas standing next to the door of the study room that they had used the day before.

"Do we have to wait around out here, or can we go into our room?" Paul asked as he approached.

"Professor Ortega usually talks to us for a minute and tells us what we'll be focusing on before we separate into study groups." Amelia said informatively.

"Nicholas, were you able to get your part of the report finished?"

"Yeah. It's just the summoning spell. Amelia's got it. She said that she'd look it over before we turn it in. I suck at reports." Nicholas admitted.

"Amelia, if you're helping us, you should get credit for it. Your name should be on the report along with ours." Paul said frankly.

"But she didn't have anything to do with casting the spell." Nicholas whined.

"If she contributes to the report, then she deserves to have her name on it. Besides that, if she does any fact checking and actually finds a mistake, then she *will* be in some part responsible for whatever grade we end up getting." Paul said reasonably.

"If you want, I could include what I observed when you were doing the summoning. I already had my scrying spell thrown wide open, so I could see all of what you were doing." Amelia interjected.

"Since you already have the information, you might as well include it." Paul said thoughtfully.

"So does that mean that your part of the report is ready?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"For the most part. I have to make one little change. I found a better way to draw the casting circle."

"What did you..." Amelia began to ask, but stopped when Professor Ortega led a group of teachers into the room.

* * * * *

"Good afternoon! I hope that this day finds all of you well." Professor Ortega said formally.

"Today your teachers are going to be focusing on how you are balancing forces in regard to your individual spells. Although it may seem to some of you that you have a bottomless reserve of power to draw upon, as you progress in your magic, you'll discover the need to use it efficiently. Learning the proper techniques now will serve you well in the future."

Paul could see the importance of what Professor Ortega was proposing.

"Now, if you will proceed to your study rooms, we will begin this day's adventure."

* * * * *

"Do you want to make your changes to your report before we start?" Amelia asked as they walked into their room.

"Yeah. I'll need to use the computer for that." Paul said as he looked toward the computer at the side of the room.

"You can use the computers in the outer room whenever you want, but Mr. Gilbert has to sign you into this one." Amelia informed him.

Just as she said so, Mr. Gilbert walked into the room, looking professional and prepared for a productive work session.

"How are we doing today?" Mr. Gilbert asked as he placed his messenger bag on a table at the side of the room.

"I've got my report for Professor Ortega almost finished, but I need to make one little change. Can I use the computer for a few minutes?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Yes. And if you wouldn't mind, I'd very much like to have a look at your report as soon as you're done with it."

"Yes sir. I'd be interested to hear your opinion of it."

* * * * *

After signing in, Mr. Gilbert surrendered the chair to Paul, allowing him to work.

It took a minute for Paul to bring his report up, but he was soon working to replace the section where he described how he drew the circle with the much simpler pi plot from his numerology class.

Paul briefly scanned what he had written to be sure that the changes fit in with the rest of the report. Once he was done, he looked around to see if Amelia were ready to add her part.

He found Nicholas and Amelia watching him from across the room.

"How do you want to do this?" Paul asked as he walked to them.

"I thought that I'd compile what you've both done, then I'd add my own information." Amelia said frankly.

"That sounds good to me. But would you mind if I looked over the report when you're finished with it? I'd like to read the whole thing at once before we turn it in." Paul asked hopefully.

"Yes. I'd feel better about it if you did." Amelia said honestly.

"What should I be doing while you're working on the report?" Paul asked cautiously.

"If you don't have anything else assigned, get with Mr. Gilbert."

"I'll do that now."

* * * * *

"Mr. Gilbert, I've finished working on my part of the report, do you have something else for me to work on right now? I mean, I'm starting off behind everyone else, so there's probably something that I should be studying." Paul chattered nervously.

"There are many things that you *could* be studying, but the way this class is organized, every student is encouraged to compete with their own achievements thus far. What do you think should be the next step in your training?"

"Well, I made the summoning diagram and was able to come up with the missing locus. So I guess that the next step would probably be for me to actually summon something... except that I don't have a clue where to start."

"Yes. From what I witnessed yesterday, there is no doubt that you are fully capable of summoning. I believe that the most productive course we could take right now is to capitalize on what you've already mastered and take that next step. To do this properly, you might need the assistance of your classmates."

"Okay. What do I have to do?" Paul asked cautiously.

"You have a library of magical texts at your disposal. Rather than tell you specifically what you should conjure, I'll let you choose for yourself. There is no shortage of low-level summoning spells."

"Okay. So I just pick one and summon it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Correct. But I will ask that whatever you choose have a physical form. Even if it's just a little speck of a demon, I would like for it to be fully manifested within this dimension. It's too easy for monstrous demons to hide their true natures by tricking new wizards into summoning them and only manifesting the smallest fraction of their true selves." Mr. Gilbert warned.

"Yeah. I noticed that limitation was built into Xaphan's summoning spell. I'll be sure that whatever spell I use has the limit built into it." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Also, whatever you summon, you must also be able to command. Again, from what I saw yesterday, I'm not concerned about that. You have more than enough strength of will to dominate whatever you are able to conjure."

"I'm not comfortable thinking of myself dominating anyone or anything, but when I know that what I'm doing is right, I can make myself do it."

"Good. The final part of your task will be to take that which you have summoned and return it to its place of origin. It shouldn't be much of a problem at this level. Later on, it can become more of a challenge due to the fact that what you have summoned may not want to leave."

"Put it back where I got it from. Got it." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Let me know when you've chosen which spell you're going to attempt. And, it goes without saying, do not attempt to summon *anything* without supervision." Mr. Gilbert said firmly.

"Yeah. Don't worry. I'm not ready to work without a net." Paul assured him.

Mr. Gilbert smiled at Paul, then walked across the room to where Amelia and Nicholas were working on the computer.

* * * * *

Paul was fully aware that magic was real.

He knew without a doubt that there were unseen forces at work that he didn't understand.

Yet he couldn't account for the 'need' that he was feeling to find one particular spell.

He bypassed hundreds of books without ever considering them, simply because he somehow knew that they weren't 'the one'.

When he finally did stop to look through a book, he'd leaf through, looking for the exact summoning spell that he wanted, without consciously knowing what it was that he was looking for.

All he knew is that he was feeling intense frustration at his inability to find exactly the right spell.

* * * * *

After going through approximately half the library, Paul happened upon a rather ordinary looking book that made his heart jump for some inexplicable reason.

He took the book down with shaking hands and flipped directly to a section toward the back, as if already knowing what the book contained.

While leafing page by page, he slowly walked toward one of the tables at the periphery of the room.

He was somehow able to ease himself down into a chair, despite having all of his attention focused on the text before him.

A sudden rush of relief washed over him as he found the spell that he wanted. The strange thing was, he didn't know *why* he wanted it. He couldn't think of any reason that he should know about the existence of the spell in advance.

Regardless, he looked through the spell and found that it contained everything that he would need to do a simple summoning. There wasn't a spell diagram drawn out for him, but he had everything that he would need to construct a diagram on his own.

As he read through the spell, he realized that it didn't give any clues about 'what' it would summon. However, the spell was incredibly limited in what it *could* summon. In fact, the number of limitations on the spell made it likely that it was specifically tailored to one or two types of demons, disallowing all others from that same realm.

Paul turned his attention toward the realm that the spell targeted. Being completely new to summoning, he felt that it would be wise for him to do some investigation before committing himself to casting the spell.

Glancing across the room, Paul saw that Amelia, Nicholas and Mr. Gilbert were all gathered around the computer, working on the report.

* * * * *

Although he didn't want to interrupt, he was on a mission and reluctantly made his way across the room to them.

"Could one of you help me with something?" Paul asked hopefully as he approached.

"Certainly. What can I do for you?" Mr. Gilbert asked as he turned to face Paul.

"I've found a spell that I'd like to do, but before I try it, I'd like to do some research on the realm that it taps into. It doesn't look like it's anything dangerous, but I get the feeling that sometimes spells are written like traps to look like they're something safe when actually they're opening a doorway into an absolute nightmare." Paul finished anxiously.

"There is always that possibility." Mr. Gilbert conceded, then continued, "Although most of the spells in our library have been vetted over the years, I think that investigating the properties of the dimension you'll be accessing is an extremely good habit to develop early."

"Okay. But I don't know where to find information on different hell dimensions." Paul said honestly.

"Amelia would be your best resource for that type of information. It ties directly into her specialty." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

"She looks like she's busy right now. Can you just point me in the right direction?" Paul asked hopefully.

To Paul's surprise, Mr. Gilbert literally pointed to the second bookcase inside the door they had entered through.

"Thank you." Paul said with a smile, then hurried away.

* * * * *

It only took a matter of fifteen minutes before Paul had found the information that he had been looking for.

The specific 'hell' dimension that he was planning to tap into had been well documented as being one of the more 'civilized' demonic planes. The Meayithan Realm had an authority structure in place, by all accounts something like a

monarchy, although since demons typically aren't born, don't live in the classical sense of the word, and aren't known to significantly age or die of natural causes, the concept of heirs and succession wasn't present in their society.

The documented demon population was such that Paul couldn't really pinpoint exactly what he might summon if he used the spell that he had found. There were a variety of low level demons with several magical specialties that might possibly fall under the terms of his spell.

Although most of them wouldn't be particularly useful to Paul in his current situation, being able to summon any of them might be beneficial later on, if only as a source of information about what The Meayithan Realm was like.

Satisfied that he wasn't about to do something monumentally stupid, Paul returned his reference materials to the bookcase, then walked back across the room to where Mr. Gilbert, Nicholas and Amelia were still gathered in front of the computer.

"I'm ready to try, whenever you have time." Paul quietly interrupted.

"Already?" Mr. Gilbert asked with surprise, then said more calmly, "Let me see what you're proposing."

Paul handed him the book, already opened to the first page of the spell.

"While I'm familiar with this realm, I'm not sure if I've ever seen anyone attempt to summon from it." Mr. Gilbert said absently as he read.

Paul waited with anticipation for Mr. Gilbert's decision.

"Yes. There seem to be sufficient safeguards in place to prevent you from summoning something too overpowering. However, I think that as an added precaution, I should ask Professor Ortega to join us. Not only will he be invaluable if something were to go wrong, but I also get the sense that he would be rather interested to see what you can achieve."

Before Paul could agree, object or even consider what was being proposed, Mr. Gilbert hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"You're going to summon a demon right now?" Nicholas asked as he approached, leaving Amelia to work on the computer alone.

"I'm going to try." Paul said timidly.

"It's only your second day here. Are you trying to prove something or are you just stupid?"

"I'm trying to do my *best*." Paul said coldly to Nicholas, then added, "And next time, I'll try to do even better."

"No matter what you do, it'll never be enough. They'll always expect more and more out of you until you can't give them what they're asking for. But if you do just enough to get the next grade, then you'll always have more that you *can* do. You can finish with strength instead of ending in defeat." Nicholas said informatively.

"Maybe. But I think that you're missing one important thing."

"What's that?"

"You're doing what you do for *them*. You let their minimum expectations dictate how hard you work and what you try to achieve. I'm doing what I do for *myself*."

"What's the difference?"

"One difference is that I don't care if you can do something better than I can. I don't feel threatened by you. You're my teammate in the group, so I'm just as happy to work with you and help you as not. Another difference is, doing it this way, I can feel *good* about myself. If I know that I'm trying my hardest and giving my best, then no matter how it ends up turning out, I'll be able to look in the mirror and be proud."

Nicholas snorted with laughter at the proclamation, then said, "Feel good about yourself all you want. In the end, it means nothing. When you crash and burn, I'll still be here, marking time until I can get out of this place and into a college where I can learn some 'real' magic."

"I have a feeling that you've already refused to learn what's most important."

"Yeah, whatever. We'll see who's right in the long run." Nicholas said knowingly.

"I guess we will." Paul agreed.

* * * * *

"Young Mr. Darroch, Mr. Gilbert has informed me that you are preparing to attempt a rather ambitious summoning." Professor Ortega said inquisitively.

"Yes sir. I'm going to try to summon an entity from The Meayithan Realm." Paul said quietly.

"While the summoning could have its hazards, it also has the potential to yield better than average results. I'm interested to see what you're able to summon."

"Yes sir." Paul said quietly, then asked, "Do you want for me to go ahead and do it now?"

"Make whatever preparations you need and proceed in your own time. I assure you that we won't rush you."

"I'm ready. I just wanted to be sure... never mind. I'll do it over here." Paul said as he walked to a more central location in the room.

As he was bracing himself for what he was about to do, he noticed Amelia getting up from the computer to join them.

"Amelia, do you want to do any of your scrying spells or anything before I start?" Paul thought to ask.

"Give me one minute." Amelia said as she ran to her cabinet.

Paul watched and waited as Amelia retrieved her supplies, then unrolled a mat, which had been embroidered with a spell diagram.

"I'm ready." Amelia said as she sat cross-legged before her mat.

Paul raised his arms and began performing the hand-sign gestures as he spoke aloud the long-form version of the spell to draw the spell diagram. He reasoned that since what he was doing was, in essence, putting on a show, that he might as well show them every detail of what magics were at work.

Professor Ortega, Mr. Gilbert and even Nicholas were carefully watching and listening to every detail of what Paul was doing.

A glowing pentagram appeared on the floor at Paul's feet and it was notable that the circle was nearly twice as big as the one Paul had created for Nicholas to summon Xaphan. Following the establishment of the circle, magical phrases began to appear in different areas, each explaining a different requirement of the spell being cast.

Five little balls of flame came into being, one at each point of the pentagram, which signalled more than Paul's words that the actual 'summoning' had begun.

At a certain point during the recitation of Paul's summoning spell, Professor Ortega and Mr. Gilbert turned to look at each other with surprise at one particular phrase that Paul had uttered.

Amelia watched intently as the vortex began to open, creating a filmy transparent interruption in reality.

Once the 'mechanics' of the spell had been completed, Paul realized that he had forgotten one small detail in his preparations.

He decided that since it wasn't part of the spell being presented, that it was alright for him to perform the spell to change his clothes internally, so it didn't disrupt the rest of his presentation.

As his personal magic began to flow out of him to fuel the summoning, Paul let go of his human form and allowed himself to flawlessly slip into his demon visage.

"The time has come."

"Follow my voice."

"Your master summons you."

"Come to me now."

Those in the room were enthralled by the change not only in Paul's appearance and his deeper voice, but also in his suddenly forceful demeanor.

In his demon form, Paul's presence became almost frighteningly powerful.

"Heed my command."

"Come forth."

"I demand it!"

Paul's entreaty seemed to come from a place of pure power. He was simply summoning his minions to do his bidding, as was his right.

Professor Ortega, Mr. Gilbert, Nicholas and Amelia watched breathlessly as something began to emerge from the gauzy orifice suspended above the glowing pentagram.

When the dark, misshapen salamander was finally able to make its way through, it dropped to the floor with a sickening ::splat::.

"Your master summons you!"

"Come forth!" Paul screamed toward the vortex.

Professor Ortega and Mr. Gilbert exchanged another concerned look, but their attention was drawn back to the summoning diagram as another grotesquely deformed amphibian dropped to the floor with a wet squelching sound.

"What I have opened, I now close. What I have closed, I now seal." Paul said as he made a grand gesture over his spell diagram.

"You should really leave the gate open so that you can return them." Mr. Gilbert warned.

"I'll open it again when I need to." Paul assured him, then realized that his much deeper voice might be construed as defiant or less than respectful.

"What the *hell* are those?" Nicholas asked with disgust.

"Yaggoral." Paul said simply, then looked down to the two disgusting slimy things and said, "While you're on this plane of existence, you need to take on the forms of native beings."

The two squirming little... things... didn't make any show of having heard his words. But both were looking up at him with slightly glowing red eyes.

"I command it." Paul said as a simple statement of fact.

Both the slimy creatures began to writhe. It wasn't clear if they were in pain, ecstasy or if they were just having some sort of seizures.

"What..." Amelia asked as she backed away.

First one, then the other began to reshape themselves. What had been slimy a moment before was now furry. The long thin bodies became more compact and took on a more conventional appearance.

When the transformation was complete, sitting in the middle of the glowing circle were a small white kitten and a small black puppy. The kitten had a black patch of fur surrounding one eye, just as the puppy had a white patch.

"How did you do *that*?" Nicholas asked in confusion.

"I didn't. Yaggoral have a natural shape-shifting ability. I just told them to change into something that belongs in this world." Paul said simply.

"Mr. Darroch. I have a feeling from your method of spellcasting that you intentionally summoned these *exact* demons." Professor Ortega said slowly.

"Yeah. I got that feeling too." Paul said uncomfortably.

"Would you care to explain?" Professor Ortega asked as more of a demand than a question.

"I don't know. That's the truth." Paul said simply, then explained, "I never met my dad, so I don't know if maybe he has some influence on me or something. I've also never met my grandparents, my mom's parents. I guess they're demon summoners too. So there could be magic at work on me from any or all of them. All I know is that I was sort of 'pushed' to summon my familiars, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah."

"Familiars? Are you sure?"

"Yes. We have a magical binding pact."

"Are you planning on keeping them with you?" Professor Ortega asked cautiously.

"No. I'll summon them when I need them." Paul said simply.

"Can you tell me more about this compulsion that led you to summon these creatures?"

"Not really. Every now and then I'll get this feeling like something is a *really* good idea, so I'll go ahead and do it. When I go back and think about it later, I'll realize that the idea kind of came out of nowhere... but it usually works out. I mean, I don't end up doing stupid things that get me in trouble."

"Do you think that you can recognize this compulsion when it comes over you?"

"Yeah. Most of the time when it happens, it's about things that really don't matter, I just have to make a choice about something and it pushes me one way or the other. You know, like deciding between pepperoni or supreme pizza or something like that."

"But just now it drew you to summon two familiars." Professor Ortega cautiously prompted.

"Yeah. But since I had to summon something anyway and I didn't have any reason to summon one thing over another, I just decided to go with it."

Professor Ortega looked to Mr. Gilbert to see if he had anything to add.

"I think he completed his first summoning without significant issue." Mr. Gilbert offered weakly.

"Yes. The method of casting was flawless. The presentation was appropriate for what he was attempting. The resulting summoning was successful, twice. Young Mr. Darroch had full control over those whom he had summoned. And although he has not as yet returned the summoned beings to their native plane of existance, I have no reason to doubt that he will do so in nothing less than an exemplary manner. This was a successful summoning by any measure, but being his first summoning in this class makes it that much moreso."

"Thank you sir." Paul said respectfully.

"You've set the bar rather high for yourself."

"Yes sir. I like it up there." Paul finished with a smile.

"A very good attitude to have, young man." Professor Ortega said pleasantly, then added more grimly, "But please *do* try and be aware of what you are being compelled to do. If you find it troubling, come discuss it with me and we'll look deeper into it."

"Yes sir." Paul immediately agreed, then added, "But like I told you before, it usually only happens with stuff that doesn't matter, you know, like choosing between Pepsi and Coke."

"Young man, I'll have you know that I'm a veteran of the cola wars." Professor Ortega said with a restrained smile.

"Yes sir." Paul said respectfully.

"Don't forget to send your new friends home before class ends." Professor Ortega said before turning to leave.

"Yes sir, I will." Paul called after him.

* * * * *

When Paul turned his attention back to the others, he noticed them all staring at him.

It took a moment for him to realize what they were looking at.

With a little internal push, Paul made his demon visage subside.

Paul then waved one hand in the general direction of the glowing spell diagram and it faded from existence.

"Come on, guys." Paul said as he sat cross legged on the floor beside where the diagram had been.

As soon as he was seated, the excited kitten and puppy both scrambled to climb onto his lap.

"Forming attachments to summoned beings is generally frowned upon." Mr. Gilbert said in a warning tone.

"I know. They're familiars, not pets." Paul said simply, but seemed to be determined to give the two creatures equal amounts of cuddles and scratches behind the ears as he said it.

"I don't understand the difference between the demons that Nicholas summons and Paul's familiars." Amelia said cautiously.

"Loyalty." Mr. Gilbert said simply.

When he didn't seem to be inclined to explain, Amelia cautiously asked, "How does that work?"

"Nicholas commands his demons to do his will. They obey because of his dominance over them. Paul's familiars serve him because they are loyal to him. Even if Paul were to become incapacitated for some reason and couldn't command them, they would remain at his side and defend him to the best of their abilities."

"But why are they loyal to Paul? Did I miss that part when it happened?" Amelia asked curiously.

"No. That is the result of something that must have happened elsewhere. The yaggoral have sworn their loyalty either to Paul or to another and are serving Paul at the other's bidding." Mr. Gilbert said slowly, then looked to Paul and asked, "Do you have any idea of how this happened?"

"Not really." Paul answered honestly, then said, "I guess it could have something to do with my dad... but maybe that's just my wishful thinking."

"And your father would be..." Mr. Gilbert said in a leading tone.

"A demon. That's all I know about him."

"And you suspect that he commanded the yaggoral to serve you?"

"Like I said, it's probably just wishful thinking. There's no reason for him to know that I even exist, much less to care about how I'm doing."

"This may be a stupid question, but since demons aren't alive or human or anything like that, how could someone... you know... have a kid that way?" Nicholas asked uncomfortably.

"Actually, if you'll look at Paul's lap, you'll see the answer." Mr. Gilbert said simply.

"Excuse me!" Paul said with immediate offense.

Realizing the way that sounded, Mr. Gilbert blushed as he explained to the group, "I was referring to the yaggoral in Paul's lap. They are demonic beings physically transformed into natural creatures. In this form they could enjoy sexuality with a member of the species that they appear to be and were they older, they might be capable of producing viable offspring."

"So you're saying that Paul's mom got it on with a demon who shapeshifted into human form?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"Perhaps. Just as with other types of magic, there are many levels of shape-shifting. An arch-demon might exist in a fully human form at all times, simply because it pleases him to do so. I've heard various accounts of that. However, most average demons who have the ability to shapeshift only do so when there is a need. The shapeshifting spells simply require too much magic to maintain."

"I don't understand about familiars. To be honest, I kind of thought that they were just made up stories." Amelia said frankly.

"The concepts of duty, trust and loyalty seem to have fallen out of favor in recent years, so the demand for honorable companions has lessened. These days people tend to only believe in what they can absolutely control for themselves." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

"But are familiars really a thing? I mean, what can they do that other demons can't?" Amelia asked curiously.

"Again, it simply comes down to trust. In most cases a summoned being absolutely loathes their master and they only follow his orders because they are compelled to do so by the conditions of the summoning spell. If they were given an opportunity, they would gleefully betray him and delight in his agonizing death." Mr. Gilbert said dispassionately.

"And a familiar would fight to defend their fallen master, even to their own death." Amelia quietly provided, completing Mr. Gilbert's thought.

Mr. Gilbert considered for a moment, then said, "Paul, good work. You may spend the remainder of the class 'motivating' your familiars, if you would like."

Paul easily nodded his acceptance to the arrangement as he continued cuddling and scratching the squirming little balls of fur.

"Since Nicholas was able to perform a successful summoning yesterday and Paul was able to do so today, I think you can guess what I'll be expecting tomorrow." Mr. Gilbert said as he looked askance at Amelia.

"Yeah. No pressure. Like my grandma says, 'It's like following Streisand.'." Amelia said sourly.

"What?" Paul asked in confusion.

"Not to worry. I promise that you'll be graded on your own merits and not compared to your classmates." Mr. Gilbert assured her.

Amelia glanced at him with undisguised irritation, then turned to Paul and said, "We've got the report compiled if you want to take a look at the final product before we print it out."

"Yeah. I'll do that now." Paul said as he gathered his yaggoral.

"Before you do that, could you make a summoning circle for me so that I can summon Frederick?" Nicholas grudgingly asked.

"Sure." Paul said easily, then glanced at the floor beside him.

Within a few seconds, Frederick's summoning septagram and seven fireballs appeared.

"Thanks." Nicholas reluctantly choked out, then started his summoning ritual.

* * * * *

Paul settled himself on the chair in front of the computer and ended up with a yaggoral perched on each shoulder.

"Did you study Nicholas' spell diagram?" Mr. Gilbert quietly asked as he approached.

"I wouldn't say that I 'studied' it, but I read through it enough to understand its construction. If you'll look at the primary transit locus and the bounce coordinates, you'll see that I cleaned it up a little." Paul said absently as he read.

"Do you know where Frederick's home dimension is?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously, not wanting to draw too much of Paul's attention from his reading.

"No. I think you're right. The only way to trace it all the way back is going to have to be Amelia's way. There's not enough information in the spell to tell me where it's drawing from."

"Yes. I just thought that since you seemed to have such an aptitude for summoning, that you might have some insights."

"Nope. Frederick comes from one of many demonic realms... or maybe New Jersey. That's all I've got."

"What do you think of the report?"

"I like it. I'm glad that Amelia added her observations. It makes it read a little more like an eyewitness account than an instruction manual." Paul said honestly.

"I agree. If you ever have to submit a report for publication, I suggest that you attempt to use this format. It's very readable."

"Yeah..." Paul began to say, but was interrupted by a tiny mewling cry from his left shoulder.

"What was that?" Paul asked.

The kitten purred, then gave one quiet little growl from deep in it's throat.

"Ginh Zah noticed that I didn't put the locus in the spell diagram that I drew. I forgot to ask you if that was alright."

"Yes. If you had included it, I would have seen that it was removed before it was submitted for review by a larger audience." Mr. Gilbert assured him, then cautiously asked, "You can understand what the kitten says?"

"Yes and no." Paul said as he looked away from the computer to meet Mr. Gilbert's eyes. "Actually, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah can make themselves be understood by whoever they want. They learned the spells so that they could carry messages for me or gather intelligence."

"They told you this?"

"Yeah. They've been sort of introducing themselves to me while I've been petting them." Paul said as he turned his attention back to the report.

"This sounds to me like ancient wizardry from an age long past." Mr. Gilbert said thoughtfully.

"Things that go can come again, like a circle..." Paul began to say, but was interrupted by a yipping little bark.

"Excuse me. Like a *pendulum*." Paul said with a smile at the puppy on his right shoulder.

Mr. Gilbert watched as Paul went back to reviewing the report, with the puppy and kitten intently reading from his shoulders.

* * * * *

"Paul. Do you have a minute?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"Sure. What did you need?" Paul asked as he turned.

"You heard Mr. Gilbert. I have to do a summoning tomorrow. Do you think... I mean, is there any way that you know that I could summon a familiar like you did?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"I didn't really *plan* to summon these guys. Things just kind of worked out..." Paul was saying when the kitten on his shoulder meowed, rather loudly, into his ear.

"What?" Paul asked as he focused on the kitten.

The little mewling cry that the kitten emitted sounded to Amelia almost to be a form of speech.

"Okay. We could try that." Paul said simply, then turned to Amelia and said, "Ginh Zah said that she knows someone who might like to be your familiar. If you'll summon her tomorrow, you two can talk it over and decide what you both want to do."

"Really? That would be great! What do I have to do?" Amelia asked happily.

"I'll go ahead and give you everything that I had so that you'll be able to do the summoning. Do you want for me to make the diagram for you or would you rather do the whole thing yourself?" Paul asked curiously.

"I think it would be better if I did it on my own. That way I won't have to wonder if I'll be able to do it if you aren't around."

"Okay. I can respect that." Paul said simply, then carefully took the puppy off his right shoulder.

"I'm going to send Ginh Zah and Mah Zah back so that they can talk to their friend. When you do your summoning tomorrow, she'll be waiting to answer your summons." Paul said as he placed Ginh Zah and Mah Zah on the floor.

"What's her name?"

"Knowing her name gives you power over her, so you'll have to find that out for yourself." Paul said frankly.

"Did you have to find the names for *your* familiars?" Amelia asked curiously.

"I already knew them... I just don't know how." Paul said simply, then added, "They don't know either."

Amelia watched as Paul made a gesture. A pentagram and flames suddenly came into being.

"I'll probably summon you again tomorrow, after Amelia does her summoning. While you're there, remember to find out whatever you can about what we talked about." Paul said seriously.

Ginh Zah gave a single 'meow' just as Mah Zah barked.

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow." Paul said as the vortex opened in the middle of the spell diagram.

The kitten and puppy promptly passed through the gauzy gray twist in reality and vanished.

Paul made a subtle gesture and the portal dissipated, then he turned his attention to Amelia and asked, "Do you think that the report is ready to submit?"

"What? Oh, yeah. I think so."

"Will you show me how to submit it?"

"Yes."

* * * * *

"How was your day?" Nazzy asked as Paul walked out of the study room into the main classroom.

"Pretty good." Paul said honestly.

"Did you volunteer for any more big projects?"

Paul had to think about that for a moment, but finally said, "No. Actually, I was able to submit my report, so I've got one less thing hanging over me."

"Good. It looked like you were overloading yourself."

"Where's Vinda?"

"She's talking with her friends about ghost stuff. Since she's one of the most successful ghost summoners in the class, they all go to her with their questions."

"What about you? Don't you get the same thing from the zombie summoners?"

"Actually, I'm the only one. The teachers put me in with the ghost summoners because our spells are so similar, but no one else in our class can pull up a physical manifestation... well, except your team, but that's something completely different."

"I guess that works out. This way your 'army of the undead' only has one general to lead them."

"So, are you planning on working on the big spelling project with G tonight?"

"Yeah. Whenever he's ready I'll pull up the 'construct' so that he can start working on his 'skin'."

"Vinda and I are going to work on our parts of the spell. After reading it over, she said that we can do our things without using your Alchemy elements, so even though what we do won't have any substance, we can still be sure that our parts will work."

"Good. That's what I thought too."

"What are you doing over here, being antisocial? Why don't you give the rest of us a chance to get to know the new guy?" A girl with a bit too much makeup asked as she approached. To Paul it looked like she had used the makeup to mask all her actual facial features then painted on the ones that she wanted.

"Paul, this is Carla, our own personal welcome wagon." Nazzy said with disdain dripping from his words.

"Hi." Paul said simply.

"So you're Mr. Darroch's new son? Isn't that wonderful? I can think of a dozen people that you absolutely *have to* meet." Carla said delightedly as she linked her arm through Paul's and attempted to guide him away.

"No thank you. If you'll excuse us, I was talking to Nazzy about a project that we're doing." Paul said as he planted his feet and refused to be moved.

"You know, there are advantages to being seen with the *right* people. You're new here. You should really think about that." Carla said persuasively.

"Actually, considering who my dad is, I'm pretty sure that I can hang around with whoever I want to. And just so there's no confusion, you are *not* included on that list. Now get off me." Paul finished firmly.

Carla looked shocked, but Paul was faIrly certain that the emotional reaction was as false as everything else about her.

"You're going to regret that." Carla finally said in a low voice.

"No. I really don't think that I will." Paul said with reasonable certainty..

Carla stomped away in a huff as Paul and Nazzy watched her go.

'*And people look down on demons.*'

'*They call them monsters.*'

'*I wonder how many of those same people have bothered to look in a mirror.*'

"You keep surprising me, Paul. You're usually so quiet and willing to go along with anything, then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, you take a stand."

"I choose my battles." Paul said simply, then explained, "When it's something that matters, I do what I have to do. Besides that, if I let some makeup-based life form make me her bitch, how am I ever going to be able to command a demon?"

"I wonder what you'd find if you excavated down through all that makeup?" Nazzy asked with a smile.

"More makeup... all the way to the core."

* * * * *

"Paul! What did you do?" Vinda asked as she rushed to join him and Nazzy.

"About what?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Well, according to Carla, she came over here to introduce you around and make you feel welcome and you practically assaulted her!" Vinda said disbelievingly.

"Well, she came over here, that part's true." Paul said simply.

"We were talking when Carla interrupted and tried to drag Paul away to show her new pet off to her minions." Nazzy said simply, then added, "Paul said 'no'."

"So you didn't hit her?" Vinda quietly asked, sounding somewhat disappointed.

"I wouldn't dare. I'd be afraid of scraping my knuckles on the stucco." Paul finished with a grin.

"Paul thinks she's a makeup golem." Nazzy stage whispered.

"Considering her personality, or lack thereof, he might be right." Vinda reluctantly agreed.

"So, what do you think she'll do to get back at me?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I think the worst thing that she'll do is spread ugly rumors about you and try to poison your name around the school." Vinda said honestly.

"Do a lot of people listen to her?"

"Yeah. Mostly the snotty stuck-up types."

"So, basically, she's going to put a hit out on me. She'll let it be known through the grapevine that she would be pleased and look favorably upon anyone who caused me to be hurt or humiliated."

"Yeah. Sort of, I guess."

"I'm going to need you guys' help. I don't know how to defend myself against magical attacks."

"Actually, you don't have to worry too much about that. Anyone caught using magic against another student would get into*real* trouble." Nazzy said seriously.

"What would they do to them?" Paul asked curiously.

"First, they'd be kicked out of the school. Then, depending on what they did, even worse things might happen to them in the outside world."

"Because someone who can't control themselves in school might be seen as a threat to the entire community." Paul slowly reasoned.

"Yeah. So with magical retribution off the table, that kind of puts all of us on the level of second graders on the playground." Vinda added.

"Maybe, but they still might be willing to try something if they think that they can get away with it. Remember that when you're privileged, the rules are for other people to follow. They don't apply to you."

"Actually, you may be right about that." Vinda reluctantly agreed.

"So, what can I do to defend myself?" Paul asked seriously.

"If you were trying to defend against ghosts, I might be able to come up with something that would help. But Carla could rally people from just about any discipline." Vinda said cautiously.

"Isn't there some... I don't know, 'protection from magic'... magic?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Yes. Of course! I hadn't thought about them in years, but there are quite a few protection spells and charms. We learned all about them in grade school. Most of them aren't too complicated." Vinda said with increasing enthusiasm.

> "*From the depths of hell, the darkest night, the deepest fear, from Him without mercy.*"
>
> "*I call forth the power to vanquish mine enemies.*"
>
> "*Let the damned be horrified by their fates.*"
>
> "*Show mercy not, for those who would cause me harm.*"
>
> "*Thrice-damned retribution, I call upon mine attackers.*"
>
> "*Allow them to survive to lament their choices.*"
>
> "*Give them not the peace of death.*"

"If you want, I can probably find a protection spell or two in some of my old spell books at home. I'm pretty sure I've still got them." Vinda quietly offered.

"No thanks. I think I've got it covered now." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Wait. Did you just come up with a protection spell, right here on the spot?" Nazzy asked cautiously.

"Yes. I don't think I really have to worry about being attacked, but if I am, you might want to worry for whoever attacks me. I'm pretty sure that the spell that I just cast isn't from this plane of existence." Paul finished timidly.

"Ouch! That sounds nasty." Nazzy said cautiously.

"Well, if they don't try to magically attack me, it won't matter." Paul said weakly.

"You're scaring me." Vinda said honestly.

Paul smiled at her, then said, "Yeah, well I'm a half-demon. I think it kinda comes with the territory. If you can't handle it, I understand."

"Nah. We'll be fine." Nazzy said with an easy grin. "If we can't handle being around someone a little dangerous, we might as well join the 'fluffy bunnies'."

At the sound of the final bell ringing, all of them gathered their things and proceeded to the door.

* * * * *

"How was your class?" G asked as he caught up to the group.

"Pretty good. I made some new enemies today. How was yours?" Paul asked casually.

"Fine." G responded uncertainly, then cautiously asked, "Is someone causing you trouble?"

"Carla." Vinda supplied, knowing that the one word answer would be enough for G to grasp the entire situation.

"I would have thought that she'd try to be your best friend. She's been sniffing around me since we were eight years old when she realized that my dad was someone important." G said frankly.

"Yeah. She tried that. It didn't work." Paul reluctantly responded.

"Paul called her on her bullshit and shut her down. You would've been proud of the way that he stood up for himself." Nazzy said with a big smile.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much. Carla only hears what she wants to hear. I think that in her delusional little world, everyone loves her." G said thoughtfully.

"What I'm more worried about is one of her vapid minions coming after Paul. Don't underestimate the power of the clique." Vinda said frankly.

"There's my locker. Do you want to show me the locking spell now?" Paul asked as he pointed ahead of them.

"Nazzy? Do you want to show him? This is more your thing than mine." G asked hopefully.

"Sure. Which one is it?"

"1402." Paul immediately responded.

"This is a basic spell, so you should be able to do it without a problem." Nazzy explained, then slowly and carefully spoke the words of the spell while performing a series of simple gestures.

"Wait. Can you do that again?" Paul asked as he watched carefully.

Nazzy dismissed the first casting of the spell, then went through it again.

"Okay. So physical forces are manifested to create a matter plug in just the right configuration to pop the lock." Paul said thoughtfully.

"I never thought about *how* it worked, it just did." Nazzy said honestly.

"Okay. I think I've got that." Paul said slowly, then continued, "G said something about using a locking spell, so that someone couldn't go behind me and pop the lock. That's something totally different, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's not actually a lock in the physical sense. It's a binding seal that prevents anyone else from being able to magically open it." Nazzy said instructively.

"I'm ready." Paul said as he watched carefully.

Nazzy went through the process of forming a spell not only on the locking mechanism, but also on the structure of the locker.

"So this prevents someone from making the locker door insubstantial and reaching through it." Paul said slowly.

"Yeah. But it also keeps them from manifesting a portal inside your locker or doing anything to the lock or hinges. As far as I know, it's pretty secure. I know that there's a 'next-level' spell that you can use, but I haven't learned it. I don't keep anything important in my locker anyway."

"Yeah. But if I have rabid 'fluffy bunnies' after me, they might try to set me up by planting something illegal in my locker." Paul said frankly.

"I can't tell if you're being paranoid or smart." Vinda said slowly.

"Maybe I'm being both. They *are* out to get me." Paul said seriously.

"Why don't you go ahead and try the locking spell? We need to get out to the vans." G suggested.

Paul nodded, then duplicated Nazzy's casting of the locking spell.

"That didn't look right." Nazzy said slowly.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked cautiously.

"That's a really easy spell. From the way you cast it, it seemed like it took a lot more power and effort than it should have." Nazzy said seriously.

"Yeah. It felt that way too." Paul said slowly, then explained, "It's something like when I try to speak Spanish. I can see the words, but I'm not comfortable with the pronunciation. It's like my mouth hasn't been trained to form those sounds."

"And that's what it's like casting the locking spell?" G asked to confirm.

"Yeah. Most spells so far have felt like they're in my native language, but this one feels... foreign." Paul explained with difficulty.

"We've got to go before our vans leave. Keep track of any other *foreign* spells and we can try to see if they have anything in common." G said decisively.

Paul slowly nodded his agreement.

Nazzy did a quick gesture toward the locker and nothing happened.

"I just wanted to make sure that your spell actually worked. From the casting of it, I wasn't completely sure."

Paul nodded at him, then followed along as the group walked toward the main part of the school.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Curtis?" Paul asked when he spotted him.

"I'm okay. I've been waiting for you. Is everything alright?"

"Yeah. Why?" Paul asked as they walked.

"I don't know. You seem to be a little down, that's all."

"Yeah. Well I guess every day can't be filled with unicorns and rainbows."

"I guess not. So you're okay? No problems?"

"None worth worrying about. How about you? How were your classes?"

"Boring as hell. I mean, sure, I guess I probably want to learn about American History, but seriously? Do they have to make it soooo dull?"

"Do you like hot wings?" Paul asked curiously as he stopped to look Curtis in the eyes.

"Um... yeah." Curtis stammered at the sudden non sequitur.

"What about plain chicken wings, without any seasoning?"

"I don't think I've had them that way, but they sound kinda gross."

"I think so too. The point I'm trying to make is that American History, or any history for that matter, is full of exciting stories of regular people achieving incredible

things. But when they 'condense' the history to put it into a text book, they boil it down to the facts and take out all the flavor."

"Okay. I think I see what you're saying..."

"If you want to find an interesting story about history, you have to go looking for it. Read biographies and actual eyewitness accounts. Try to look at the same events from different perspectives. If the event was big enough to be included in your history book, there's a good chance that there's an incredible story behind it. You just have to find it."

"Or you could just regurgitate what it says in the textbook and get the grade." Nazzy added.

"Yeah. You could do that too." Paul said with a smile.

"Guys... Vans." Vinda urged.

"Right. Sorry Curtis, we'll talk to you again tomorrow." Paul said as they started walking again.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Joe?" G asked as he climbed into the van.

"I'm fine. Tony's going to be out for another couple of days, I found out that his wife just had a baby and he wants to spend a few days at home with them before going back to work." Joe said with a smile.

"Good. I was worried that he might be sick." G said as he got into the back seat.

As Paul climbed into the van, he noticed that everyone else was present. Sandy and Dex were sitting side by side, as was customary for them. And in the front seat beside the driver was Catherine, who Paul had yet to speak one word to.

G automatically put an arm around Paul as he settled into place.

Paul smiled at the gesture and snuggled in close to enjoy the sensation of being held.

"Would you two stop it!?" Sandy sneered at them.

"No." G and Paul answered simultaneously.

* * * * *

Paul was enjoying the incredibly comfortable ride when he noticed the red haired boy, Dex, glancing back at them.

"This is what makes it all worth it." Paul said quietly.

Dex looked away uncomfortably, but Paul got the sense that it wasn't with disgust.

Paul felt a little kiss on his ear lobe and smiled as he let all his worries drift away for a few blissful moments.

* * * * *

"We're supposed to go to the parlor. I think this must be your mom's handwriting." G said as he read the note that was posted on the outside door to G's room.

"I wonder what that's all about." Paul said as he followed G inside.

"I'm guessing that your mom's going to show you the 'family secret' summoning spells." G said frankly as he took off his backpack.

"Oh yeah. You're probably right. Do you want to go with me?"

"I'll go, but if it starts getting boring I might decide to duck out for a snack."

"Not without me you won't."

"Let's just see how things go before deciding anything." G said, then gestured toward the hallway that led into the house.

* * * * *

"Mom?" Paul asked cautiously as he led the way into the parlor. As he looked around the room, he remembered that it was the same room where he had first met G.

"I'm almost ready." Beth said from down on her knees at one side of the room.

"Do you need any help?" Paul immediately asked, rushing to her side.

"No. I'm just finishing this spell diagram." Beth said in concentration.

Paul looked over the diagram and was surprised at just how complicated it appeared to be.

After a moment, Beth quietly asked, "What do you see?"

"An eight pointed summoning diagram." Paul answered simply.

"Made of..."

"Two squares, turned at a forty-five degree angle to each other, a circle surrounding them, a circle within them, a star terminating at each of the eight points of the squares... there's another square, no two squares inside the inner circle and more triangles than I can even count."

"What's your first impression of the diagram?" Beth asked as she stood and brushed off her knees.

"It's more than a summoning diagram, it's like one diagram woven inside another."

"That's exactly what it is." Beth said with a smile.

Paul closed his eyes and shook his head slowly as he tried to sort through the permutations of having a summoning diagram inside a diagram.

"Your whole family does this?" G asked, drawing Paul's attention.

"It's the family legacy, but not every member of the family has access to it. It's only passed down to those who have shown that they have a talent for summoning and embraced it." Beth explained.

"How do you use it?" Paul asked slowly as he once again focused his attention on the spell diagram.

Beth began to chant in an ancient language that Paul couldn't identify.

Although he didn't know the word for word translation, he could still catch the gist of what she was doing.

"Can you do that?" G asked in a whisper.

"Not even close. This diagram is about twelve times more complicated than anything that I've tried to do." Paul whispered in return.

"In the time of Nedra, in the year of Thoth, under the light of Taurus with Sagittarius ascending in glory whilst Selene be in Scorpio. Now I do entreat that balance be achieved and maintained, it is by my will, should the universe consent."

Paul looked at his mother curiously at her strange invocation.

Before he could ask, a bright light began to form over the spell diagram.

Unlike Paul's gauzy little flaw in reality, Beth's manifestation was definitely able to be seen.

Paul and G watched in awe as the tear between dimensions grew bigger and bigger until it was taller than either of them.

"Our family has the capacity to do several high level spells at the same time. This diagram was developed by us to make use of this unique ability. No single witch can perform one of our spells. In fact, even a group of witches would be hard pressed to duplicate one of them because of their need to synchronize them *exactly*." Beth explained.

"If I'm understanding what I'm seeing, what you just did was manifest a summoning spell inside a reverse summoning spell." Paul said cautiously.

"Yes. In other words, I made a fully traversable portal." Beth confirmed.

"I'm still new to this, but aren't *all* portals traversable. I mean, if you summon something with a portal, you can send it back the same way." Paul asked slowly.

"That's only true for what you summon. The terms of a typical summoning include limits on what you will allow to traverse the passage. The primary reason being that otherwise you could potentially summon something beyond your ability to control. But along with that, there's also the amount of magic it takes to maintain a less limited passage. A one-way passage is, by its very nature, unstable so it takes a formidable amount of magic to open and maintain it. A stable two-way passage can take almost nothing to maintain once it's been established."

"So I could walk through that?" Paul asked as he looked through the portal into an intense light.

"Probably not." Beth admitted, then explained, "You see, that portal doesn't lead to a *hell* dimension."

Paul looked at her with confusion for a moment, then suddenly realized what she was implying. "It's a heavenly realm?"

"To tell you the truth, the whole heaven and hell thing is kind of subjective. We tend to use the classic terminology as a matter of convenience, but in reality what we're looking at are two opposing forces. Humans and witches tend to be more or less neutral, able to access either sets of realms, but at the same time they are incapable of surviving in either for any significant length of time."

"Wait. Wait. Are you saying that you have access to both angelic and demonic realms of existence, and not only can you summon from either, but you can actually *visit* them?" Paul asked anxiously.

"Yes. That's true. And when you say *visit*, that's exactly what it is. You can't survive more than a few hours away from the prime materia plane. The energies present in both realms are toxic to us in the long term." Beth said seriously.

Paul strained to look through the vortex, but could only see the bright light.

"Is that true for the creatures from the other realms? Can they only exist here for a short time, too?" G asked curiously.

"Some of them." Beth responded, then turned her full attention to him and explained, "Different beings have different tolerances. Those who can shapeshift to adapt to their new environment have a distinct advantage. As a rule, most diabolic creatures have a fairly high threshold and can stay longer. The divine creatures tend to be less so."

"Did you open a doorway to a heavenly realm because you knew that I wouldn't be able to walk through it?" Paul asked suspiciously.

"It had occurred to me that your mixed heritage might come into play at this stage of things." Beth said carefully.

"So you opened the heavenly doorway to test Paul?" G asked curiously.

"I wanted to give him an opportunity to discover something about himself. There have been a lot of things that I wasn't able to give him along the way. I *can* give him this." Beth said sadly.

"What does it mean that I can't even *try* to walk through it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"It could be a self-defense mechanism that you were born with." Beth said simply.

"Or maybe you're just a pussy." G said with a teasing grin.

"Not helping." Paul growled at him.

"Seriously. Is it that you *can't* or *won't*?" G asked curiously.

"Okay. I'll try, but if I turn into a pillar of salt or something, I'm going to be very *very* pissed off." Paul said firmly.

"Got it." G said in what seemed to be a completely serious voice.

Paul glanced at G and then his mother before haltingly taking steps toward the vortex.

"You don't really have to do this." G barked suddenly.

"Yes. I do." Paul said as he slowly reached into the shiney bright vortex.

* * * * *

As soon as Paul's hand entered the realm of divinity, the blood in his veins began to boil.

He snatched his hand back and clutched it to his chest as he screamed out in pain.

"Get him away from the portal." Beth called to G as she did her best to use her own body to shield Paul from any influence that the portal might be projecting on him.

"Are you alright? What can I do?" G asked in panic as he did what he was told and helped Paul across the room, to one of the couches.

"I don't know. It hurts. I've never felt anything that hurt so bad." Paul said as he held his hand against his chest protectively.

"Let me see it." G said softly, doing his best to comfort Paul.

"It hurts." Paul whimpered.

"I know. Let me see." G said again as he guided Paul to ease his injured hand away from his body.

Paul consciously looked away as he asked, "How bad is it?"

"Um... Bad." G said honestly, then looked at Beth anxiously.

"Give me a minute." Beth said as she knelt on the floor and rushed to make changes to her spell diagram.

"Paul's hurt! Do you really have to worry about your magic *now*?" G asked angrily.

After quickly chanting a long magical phrase, Beth stopped her spellcasting and said over her shoulder, "I know what Paul needs to help him recover, but this is the only place to get it."

Before G could ask, Beth stepped through a purplish-black portal hanging in the air.

Paul chanced a look at his hand, then looked away in horror. It appeared as though much of the flesh had literally been burned away. There was little, if any blood visible, since it appeared to have burst from his veins and been incinerated. Glimpses of the bones of his hand could be seen between chunks of cremated flesh.

"I feel like I'm going to pass out." Paul said as his breaths started coming shallowly and more quickly.

"DAD!" G called out, not having any idea of where his father was in the house.

"Hold him still. This might hurt a little." Beth said as she rushed out of the portal.

"He's been hurt enough." G said as he felt tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Hold him!" Beth commanded, then gripped Paul's forearm and forced his entire hand into a bucket that she had carried through the portal with her.

"What's that? What are you doing to him?" G asked as he held Paul's face in his hands and tried to see any sign of consciousness in Paul's vacant half-lidded stare.

"Cursed water. It's supposed to have magical healing properties for infernal creatures who have been injured by divine magical forces." Beth said as she fought Paul's little bit of resistance and kept his hand in the bucket.

"So you had to go to *hell* to get cursed water to heal him?" G asked dubiously.

"Do you know how many churches there are in hell?" Beth asked as she finally seemed satisfied that Paul wasn't going to fight her anymore.

"I have no idea." G said honestly.

"Exactly one." Beth said simply, then added, "They've got more than their fair share of priests, but as far as churches, there's just the one. Fortunately, I was able to port in right next to the baptismal and get what I needed to help Paul."

"They have baptisms in hell?" G asked curiously.

"Yes. Well, no. Actually, it's the exact opposite... you know what? Why don't you ask me about that some other time. Right now, we need to see how Paul is doing." Beth said as she pulled his arm out of the bucket.

G was amazed to see that Paul's hand had been restored, almost as good as new. In fact it was *exactly* as good as new. The color of the skin of his hand didn't match the skin of his arm. There was a clear delineation where the flesh had been burned away and then later restored.

"What's going on in here? Is there a problem?" D asked as he rushed into the room.

"Yeah. About five minutes ago." G answered his father without looking away from Paul.

"What happened?" D asked as he took a seat on the couch beside Paul, the other side from Beth. G was kneeling on the floor in front of Paul, trying to gain his attention.

"I didn't think there would be any harm if I let Paul touch a divine dimension, just to see if he were going to be limited in that regard." Beth said softly as she watched carefully for any sign of consciousness in Paul.

"When he touched the heavenly plane his hand exploded." G said as fresh tears started to fall.

"I had heard before that injuries caused by divine magic could be healed by diabolic cursed water, so I went and got him some... and it seems to have worked." Beth explained.

"So what's wrong with Paul right now?" D asked cautiously.

"Shock, I think." Beth said simply.

"G. Will you walk ahead and open doors for me?" D asked as he stood.

"Um, sure." G answered uncertainly as he scrambled to his feet.

D scooped Paul up into his arms, then slowly started walking toward the door.

"What are you going to do?" G asked anxiously as he did as he had been asked and opened the door ahead of his father.

"I'm going to take him to his own bed and wait with him until he regains consciousness." D said simply.

"I'm sure he'll love that." G said with a smile, then thought to add, "Except that Paul doesn't really have a bed of his own. We kind of just fall asleep wherever we happen to be when we get sleepy."

"G, don't you think your brother deserves a space of his own?" D asked quietly as he walked.

"He's more than my brother, Dad. You know that." G said frankly, then added, "It feels right to share what I have with him."

"Regardless, he deserves a space of his own. Whether the two of you choose to share his space or yours is of no concern to me, but at the end of the day, I want for Paul to have the peace of mind to know that he has a place that he can call his own. I want him to have things that are *his*. I'm concerned that he may feel that he's an extension of you, or worse, that if something happens between the two of you, that he will feel that he doesn't have a place here with us."

"I guess I've just been thinking with my dick." G said regretfully.

"You've been a wonderful brother and an incredible friend. And honestly, I don't think that Paul has suffered for a moment because of it. I'm just saying that Paul is my son now. It's time to act like it." D said firmly.

"This is a nice start." Paul muttered from D's arms.

"How are you feeling? Does it hurt?" G asked anxiously.

"Door." D said firmly.

As much as he didn't want to, G hurried ahead of them and opened the door to the connecting hallway.

"I think I can walk." Paul said uncertainly.

"We're almost there. Let me do this for you." D said gently.

"So what were you talking about when I woke up?" Paul asked slowly.

"I was just telling G that I'd like to build you your own room, so that you'd have a place of your own."

"Cool. Just make sure that it has one of these glassed in hallway bridges. I love that." Paul said with a smile.

There was a long silent moment as D carried Paul into the bedroom and carefully placed him on the bed. Being that D was only slightly taller than Paul, it was a notable feat, but D seemed to have pulled it off rather well.

"So, a glassed in hallway... that's all you want?" D asked as he sat on the edge of the bed and looked at Paul curiously.

"I've lived in so many places that I can't even remember them all. I've had to adapt to every place that I've ever lived, so I never really got into the habit of wishing for things, I just kind of accepted them and adapted however I had to."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm verrrrry rich." D finished with a smile.

"I might have picked up a clue here and there." Paul grinned.

"Just let me know if there's anything I can do to make you feel at home here." D said sincerely.

"You're doing it right now."

Chapter 6

"How are things going for you at school, Paul?" D asked gently.

"Really good. I can't believe all the things that I'm learning. All the teachers have been really great so far." Paul said happily.

"So, no problems?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

"You know how I've told you what a pain Carla can be? She went after Paul today." G told his father regretfully.

"Went after, as in, trying to get a ring on his finger?" D asked curiously.

"I wasn't there, but it wouldn't surprise me. Her entire existence seems to be based on the hope that she'll be able to find a man to take care of her so that she can eventually blame him for every little thing that's wrong in her life, real or imagined." G said frankly.

"Maybe she see's what her mother is going through and doesn't want to end up the same way, in her mid forties and desperate." D said thoughtfully.

"Actually, I think she wants to end up *exactly* the same way. That's why she's making all the same choices." G said simply.

"Either way, I think that Paul might need a little protection from magical manipulation." D said thoughtfully.

"I've already got a pretty hefty protection spell on me. If she tries anything, it'll rebound on her." Paul assured his new father.

"Alright then, I'll trust you to handle this yourself, but if I hear about you making wedding plans, I reserve the right to intervene." D said warmly.

"The only wedding plans are going to be happening in Carla's delusional little mind." Paul assured him.

* * * * *

As nice as it was to lay in bed and relax, Paul felt the weight of the obligations that he had taken on.

"G and I have a project that we have to work on tonight. We need to have our parts ready before Nazzy and Vinda come over tomorrow." Paul said regretfully.

"Paul, you need to relax for a little while. You've just been through a major trauma." D said gently.

"My part of the spell is done and besides, I'm only using the most basic spells. It takes, like, no magic. All I really need to do is set it up so that G can work on his part." Paul slowly explained.

"I can work on my sorcery project right now if you're not up to it. We can do this later." G quietly offered.

"I have something else that I have to work on later. It would really be best if we got this done right now." Paul explained.

"Just don't overdo it." D said decisively.

Paul sat up in bed and looked at the floor a few feet away.

Out of nothing, a stone pillar rose up from the floor.

"Dad, come look at this. It's really amazing." G said excitedly as he hurried to examine Paul's creation.

D stared with wide eyes at what Paul had accomplished with seemingly no effort.

D slowly got to his feet and walked to stand beside G. When D was finally able to find his voice, he turned and quietly asked, "How were you able to make something like this in less than a week of using magic?"

"That's not the best part. Touch it. It's solid." G said with a smile of pride for Paul's accomplishment.

"Touch? Do you mean that he created something *real* out of nothing?" D asked as he experimentally let his fingers drag across the tiny landscape.

"It's just a really simple spell to temporarily change the properties of matter. It's basic alchemy. No biggie." Paul explained.

"There's got to be a lot more to it than that or everyone who ever took alchemy would be doing the same thing." D said reasonably.

"All I can figure is that they must not have thought about doing it because it's such a simple spell that anyone could probably cast it."

"Prove it."

"What?"

"If it's really that simple then prove it by showing me how to do the same thing that you've just done." D said calmly.

"Okay." Paul said with a smile, happily accepting D's challenge.

"What do I do first?" D asked as he looked at the 'construct' more closely.

"I don't really have a 'first', there's kind of a lot of things going on at once, but they're all little things; really basic spells." Paul tried to explain.

"Okay. Just get me started." D said determinedly.

"I guess the *first* thing would have to be the basic 3D plotter spell from the numerology workbook." Paul said thoughtfully.

"While I'm probably familiar with the spell you're talking about, I can't be sure that it's exactly the same one and I certainly haven't memorized it."

"No problem." Paul said as he looked around.

"What are you looking for?" G asked when he noticed.

"Paper to write down the spell."

"I'll go get you some."

"No. Don't bother. I've got it covered." Paul said and looked beside the bed just as a large dark stone wall emerged from the ground.

"Oookay." G said slowly.

Paul got off the bed, then reached out and placed one finger on the smooth sheet of stone. As he did, glowing words began to appear.

"Here it is, but I'm leaving enough room for some of the other spells that we'll be using." Paul said simply.

D skimmed over the spell before looking at Paul and asking, "Where did you say that you got this spell from?"

"My numerology workbook. It was enchanted into the page to plot the 3D display of one of the spells." Paul said simply.

"When you say 'enchanted', does that mean that the spell itself wasn't printed on the page?" D asked carefully.

"No. But it took, like, a second to see through the enchantment to the spell. I guess from what Mrs. Cualla said that not everyone can see through enchantments like that." Paul said honestly.

"Okay. I'm familiar enough with the plotting spell to be able to use it, but to make it work, you have to give it coordinates to plot. Where did you come up with that?" D asked curiously.

"I made them up." Paul said simply.

"How?"

"I just imagined what I wanted it to look like when I was done, then put in the coordinates that I imagined would make that happen." Paul said simply.

"I have a feeling that the entire landscape is going to be too much for me to create, so why don't you just give me the coordinates for the pillar. I want to see if I can recreate it." D said slowly.

"Yeah. Okay. But before you do that... well, I guess it's more like '*at the same time*' you do that, you need to weave the Wizard's Light spell into the display properties. If you don't do that, all you're going to end up with are smooth looking geometric shapes."

"But the pillar looks real, it doesn't look like it's lighted." D said slowly.

"Oh, that! All I did was switch the luminosity properties to their reciprocal values so that instead of producing light they reflect it."

"To get this result, I'm guessing that you must have modified the Wizard's Light spell quite a bit."

"Well, I did a lot of stretching and skewing for the spell diagrams, so I had to do some heavy duty modifications for that. But for this, I just dumped most of the basic spell into the output properties of the 3D plotter. Here, I'll show you." Paul said as he touched his finger to the stone wall again and another portion of the wall began to fill with text.

After a moment to read it over, D slowly said, "So you established the plotter and modified the display to be made of wizards lights. Is that it?"

"Well, after that... okay, *at the same time* as that I also added an alchemy component into the Wizard's Light spell so that whatever was created would have substance, or at least seem to, because the air where anything was plotted would become solid." Paul said carefully.

"And did you say that they taught you this in Alchemy class?" D asked slowly.

"Not exactly. The teacher gave me a book to read and it mentioned that Alchemy can be used to magically alter the states of matter. I don't think it had the exact spells to do it written down, but there was enough in the description that I was able to put things together and make it work." Paul said frankly.

"Show me that." D said as he looked back to the stone wall.

Paul touched a finger to the wall and yet another enormous patch of text came into being.

"And you say that you intuitively deduced this from reading the first pages of your alchemy textbook?" D asked curiously.

"No, it wasn't the standard textbook. Mr. Hind gave me a more basic book to start off with so that I'll be well grounded in the concepts that I need to know when I finally *am* ready to start using the textbook." Paul said thoughtfully.

"So you were able to come up with *this* from a basic beginners book?" D asked dubiously.

Paul rolled his eyes, then slowly said, "All I'm doing is magically turning the gas in a plotted area into a solid. Or, in the case of the blue areas of the construct, a liquid. It's gotta be, like, the easiest first step thing in Alchemy."

"G, can you turn air solid?" D asked his son.

"I don't know. I never tried. I could probably do it using this spell." G said as he looked at the written out text.

"Go ahead." D challenged.

"I can't do it right now. I'd have to go through it a few times to get the balances right and make it all work together." G said slowly.

"Is that all? You're simultaneously doing the plotting, Wizard's Light and alchemy spells. Is that everything?" D asked cautiously.

"For the pillar, yeah. When you get into the display on top, then you have to add in some more coordinates for the plot and figure in all the different colors." Paul said frankly.

"So all that's left is the coordinates for the pillar, right?"

"Yes." Paul said, then touched the stone wall and the coordinates appeared.

"So now I have everything I need to perform the spell."

"Yeah. I think that's it."

"If I'm understanding you right, the alchemy is embedded in the Wizard's Light, which is embedded in the 3D plotting spell. Is that right?"

"I guess. I kinda do them all at once, but if you were going to do them all in a row, that'd be the way to do it."

"Can you reorganize the spell that you have written down to show everything in its proper place?" D asked hopefully.

Paul nodded, then glanced at the large stone wall. Portions of the text vanished and reformed, embedding themselves in the proper places. D made note that Paul wasn't even touching the stone wall at this point, he was doing every bit of his text manipulation internally.

"I think that should work." Paul finally said.

"Okay. I'm going to try it." D said, then raised his hands and began to do the gestures that accompanied the spell.

As he did so, he started the invocation, giving the spell parameters.

Paul and G watched as D went on and on, gesturing and speaking in a tightly controlled voice.

Occasionally, G would look at the stone wall and follow along with what his father was doing.

Although D had never been one to shy away from performing magic in front of his son, he had also never gone out of his way to make a point of it.

G knew that his father was powerful, but it seemed strange to him to watch his father casting a difficult spell.

Paul slowly nodded as D finished with the alchemy elements of the spell which led into the Wizard's Light.

G turned his attention downward, where the spell was focused, but had yet to see any indication of anything taking shape.

D continued on and on, accustomed to keeping a particular pace when spellcasting.

G looked over at the other stone pillar that Paul had created and was just beginning to realize how much of an accomplishment that it really was.

A change in his father's tone of voice made G look back to what he was doing.

There was still nothing manifested, but he recognized that his father was beginning to add the positioning coordinates to the plotting spell, thereby nearing the end.

G watched and waited for what was going to happen.

In a sudden sucking ::whoosh:: of air, a stone pillar started to rise from the floor.

G noticed that it wasn't *exactly* the same as the stone pillar that Paul had created. The 'stone' was significantly less detailed, although made with the same general pattern and color.

When D was finally done with his spellcasting, G could tell that his father had put forth a genuine effort. D looked drained.

"Easy peasy, huh?" Paul said reluctantly, obviously knowing that D had proven his point.

"I'll agree with you that you're using the lowest of low level spells... except perhaps the alchemy. But the way that you're combining them is not only ingenious, but also increases their complexity to a measurable degree. Doing that simple stone pillar

was challenging for me and it was nowhere near as complex as the manifestation you're doing for your project." D said seriously.

"Okay. It's complex, but it isn't because of magic. I mean, the spells being combined like they are take almost no magic at all. What makes them difficult is all the technical stuff." Paul explained.

"Yes. I'll agree with that." D conceded.

"I guess from the summoning that I saw my mom do, that I must have a talent for doing a lot of technical stuff, all at once. It's in my blood. So it seems to me like I should play to my strengths and even though I haven't figured out how to do any really challenging spells yet, I can still do these flashy things to get good grades."

"As long as you don't rest on your laurels and try to coast on the talent that you've inherited, I have no problem with that." D said slowly, then added, "But don't get the idea that because you can do multiple low-level spells simultaneously that you don't need to learn the more challenging spells. Your growth as a witch depends on it."

"I think I'm ready." G said, interrupting their conversation.

"For what?" Paul asked curiously.

"I've come up with a skin. Do you want to see it?" G asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I bet it's going to be great." Paul said with a smile.

D nodded at his son then turned his attention to Paul's original construct.

"Remember, I've still got to do a lot of detail work. This is just my first try." G warned.

"Go ahead. We don't expect it to be perfect." D assured him.

G nodded anxiously, then made a dramatic lifting gesture.

As he did, Paul's 'construct' transformed, ever so slightly. The little cubist landscape scene took on a feel of reality as colors blended and corners smoothed out.

"G! That's fantastic!" Paul enthused.

"Using your ability in concert with your brother's seems to be a perfect pairing." D said as he stepped closer to admire the tranquil scene of beauty.

"Well, this is really just kind of a 'sleeve' that uses the coordinates that Paul established. I haven't really done much of anything to it. Right now it's all smoothing and blending."

"Before you do anything else, remember that you're going to have to do all of this in its long form when we present it. The more complicated you make it, the longer it's going to take." Paul warned.

"To be honest, I wouldn't change a thing." D said frankly.

"I don't know. It just feels like a cheat to only do this much. It feels like I'm going to be riding on the coattails of the rest of the team." G said anxiously.

"If you can think of some improvements to make, by all means, make them. Just be sure that whatever detail you add doesn't detract from the overall image. I'm certain that what you've done here will be sufficient for you to get the grade." D said firmly.

"Okay. I have a few ideas of things that I might be able to do to improve the overall appearance, but if it's going to take too long or take away from everything else, I'll drop it." G said decisively.

"Can I come in?" Beth asked from the doorway.

"Sure. We're just showing Dad what we've been working on in school." G said happily as he gestured toward their project.

"That's beautiful!" Beth gasped as she approached.

"Paul and I did it." G said proudly, then quickly added, "It's not finished yet."

"It's like one perfect moment, frozen in time." Beth whispered.

G looked at her curiously, then slowly said, "Maybe that's what I can do to make it more 'real'."

"What do you mean?" Paul asked curiously.

"Give me a second." G said as he closed his eyes.

After a long silent moment, Beth turned to Paul and quietly said, "About before... I never intended for you to be hurt."

"I know." Paul assured her.

"I just thought that if I were to introduce you to a heavenly realm, then you could see if you had any negative reaction to it, so you'd know what you needed to watch out for in the future." Beth tried to explain.

"Yeah. I think we've got *that* answer." Paul said frankly.

"Do you think that Paul might also be susceptible to holy objects?" D asked curiously.

"No. At least, not the typical ones. I suppose that if someone had a physical artifact from the divine realm that it would probably harm Paul. Then again, such a thing

would probably degrade to nothing within a matter of days. Divine matter can't exist in this world." Beth said thoughtfully.

"I'll have to take your word for it." D said frankly, then explained, "I've never had much cause to deal with the divine or the demonic, so I don't really know much about it."

"Yes. I've noticed that most people who don't have an ability that forces them to take notice would prefer to pretend that such things don't exist." Beth said thoughtfully.

"Okay, I think I'm ready." G said, causing the others in the room to look at him.

"With what?" D asked cautiously.

"Something that I can do to really *contribute* to the project. Smoothing it out is nice and everything, but... just watch." G finished determinedly, then made a grand lifting gesture toward the construct.

As everyone looked at the tiny landscape scene, they saw it shimmer slightly, but the change was so subtle that none of them could pinpoint exactly what it was.

Paul leaned in closer and once again appreciated the look of the construct, both his work and G's.

As he was watching, he saw the tiniest motion and his eyes tracked to the movement.

The thing was so small that it took a moment for Paul to be able to identify it, but finally he realized that what he was seeing was a single leaf falling off one of the trees.

Once he realized that, he backed away slightly to take in the entire spectacle at once.

He hadn't originally noticed the slightest little waves on the lake or the miniscule movement of imaginary wind in the trees.

"I see it." Beth whispered.

"G, remember what I said about not getting too detailed?" D asked seriously.

"Yeah." G said cautiously.

"Forget it. This is amazing. Don't just do enough to get the grade. Make it *right*." D said firmly.

"Okay Dad." G said happily.

"The baby has informed me that it's time for *us* to eat. The rest of you are invited." Beth said as she reluctantly turned her attention away from Paul and G's project.

"I think baby will enjoy his or her meal more if big brother is there to share it." G said decisively.

"Brothers." Paul corrected.

"Daddy should be there too." D said with a loving smile at his wife.

"Do you need to put all of this away before we leave?" Beth asked as she looked around.

Paul glanced at the project, then asked, "Do you want to undo your part first?"

"Yeah." G said as the beautiful scene before them suddenly became pixelated.

"I don't remember it looking this bad before." Paul said honestly.

"At least there's no doubt that G is actually contributing something of value to your group project." D said reasonably.

"Yeah. He made my 8-bit *masterpiece* into something that you might actually want to look at." Paul said frankly.

"Baby... Hungry... Remember?" Beth asked impatiently.

"Right." Paul said with a grin, then withdrew his magical flow to both the 'project' and the stone wall that he had been using as a chalkboard.

In the blink of an eye, they both evaporated into nothing.

Beth looked at the remaining pillar, then at Paul expectantly.

"I didn't make that one." Paul stated simply.

When Beth glanced at G, he shook his head.

"After all I went through to create it, I kind of hate to let it go." D said frankly.

"We can make another one together, whenever you want." Paul promised.

"I think I'd like that." D said with a smile.

"So would I." Paul said honestly.

After one last look at his accomplishment, D withdrew his power and let his magical construct release in a puff of air.

"Let's go feed baby." D said as he walked to Beth's side and gently put an arm around her.

Paul and G followed along, wearing matching smiles.

* * * * *

"Ham and eggs for dinner?" Paul asked with surprise.

"Would you rather have something else?" D asked as he settled into his place at the table.

"No! This is great! I just never thought that someone as rich as you would have breakfast for dinner." Paul rushed to explain.

"We probably wouldn't be having a meal like this if we were having company over. But part of being rich means that you can have the things you want when you want them." D finished with a smile.

"As long as you're not a brat about it when you have to eat something that you're not in the mood for." G added helpfully.

"That's right." D said with a loving smile at G. "We've had a few discussions about that over the years."

"When you're used to getting your own way, it can be hard to understand that you aren't automatically entitled to everything you want... at least, it was for me. I still have times when I assume that the world will bend to my will, no matter how childish it happens to be." G said regretfully.

"It's a rich kid thing. I think you've done pretty well at getting past it, especially in comparison to some of your peers." D said frankly.

"Yeah. Seeing how spoiled and snotty other people can be helped to wake me up and realize that I didn't want to be that way." G admitted.

"I haven't noticed a problem, so you must be doing alright." Paul interjected.

"So Paul, you mentioned earlier that you had another project that you needed to work on. Is it something big?" D asked curiously.

"I just have to do a little alchemy research for a project in Basic Magic. We're making a charm."

"Your teacher has you *making* a charm on your first week in class?" D asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Since I can see through the enchantments, Mrs. Cualla wants me to learn *how* the charms work... from the inside out, I guess."

"It sounds like quite a leap, but as long as you're comfortable with it, I suppose that I can trust that your instructor knows what she's doing." D said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I'm just glad that she's not forcing me to learn a bunch of stuff that I can know just by looking. I think the class is going to be interesting."

"It sounds like you had a pretty good day." Beth said with a smile at her son.

"That's not even the best! When I got to Wizardry class, I got to do a summoning!" Paul said happily.

"They had you do a summoning on your second day?" D asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Since I'd already shown that I could make a decent spell diagram, Mr. Gilbert said that it would be okay if I tried to do an actual summoning."

"And you were able to manage to do that today?" Beth asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I mean, it's not like it was a hard one. Everything was written down for me. All I had to do was follow along with the book." Paul said earnestly.

"Paul, there are Wizards who prepare for a summoning for *weeks* before attempting it." Beth slowly explained.

"Yeah. I understand that, but this was a really simple summoning spell. It was nothing compared to the spell that you used."

"Still, it *does* seem a bit fast." Beth said honestly.

"I tell you what, if you want, I can show you the spell after dinner. It's really super simple." Paul said reasonably.

"Yes. I'd be interested to see what you can do." Beth said slowly.

"So would I." D said honestly.

"Okay." Paul said, committing himself to the endeavor.

"This potato dish is great! We should have it more often. What's it called?" G asked, interrupting the conversation.

After a long moment of silence, Beth looked down at her plate, then up at G and finally responded, "Fried."

* * * * *

When the meal was finished, the family moved into the parlor, prepared to see Paul's demonstration.

"I have all my supplies in here if you need anything." Beth said gently.

"No. I've got it." Paul said simply as he waited for the others to be seated.

Once he was sure that everyone was settled, Paul decided that since he was at home with his family he didn't need to go through the motions of putting on a show.

The floor in front of Paul began to glow with a pentagram surrounded by a circle.

Text began to appear in the different sections of the diagram and five balls of fire sprang into being.

"Ginh Zah, Mah Zah. I summon you. Come forth." Paul said aloud in a clear firm voice.

Two furry little creatures with the sweetest tiny faces and the biggest most soulful eyes appeared in the middle of Paul's summoning circle.

"See? Simple." Paul said frankly.

The kitten and the puppy both started raising a ruckus with yipping, yapping, hissing and spitting.

"I didn't mean *you*. I meant the spell I used to summon you." Paul said with playful aggravation.

The puppy and kitten quieted at his words.

"Wait. I thought you summoned *demons*, not puppies and kitties." G said slowly.

"They *are* demons. I just asked them to shapeshift into these forms when they're on our plane of existence." Paul explained as he made a sweeping gesture and the spell diagram disappeared.

"You *asked* them to shapeshift?" Beth asked suspiciously.

"Yeah. They're my familiars." Paul said calmly.

Beth shook her head, then said, "Paul, summoning familiars requires a lot more than a summoning diagram. You have to earn trust and make a pact. There's absolutely no way you could have done that in the past twenty-four hours."

"Mom, if you had a familiar and wanted it to become mine and take care of me, the pact you made would transfer to me. That's what happened here. Ginh Zah and Mah Zah have sworn their loyalty to a demon, whose name they've told me but asked me not to repeat. That demon instructed them to be my familiars. We have a magical pact that binds us together from this point forward. Their former master can no longer command them."

"Paul. You can't possibly realize how dangerous this is." Beth warned him.

"Um, it's magic. From what I've seen so far, all of it's dangerous." Paul said frankly.

"For what is given, something is taken. That's how magic works. Look at what you've just been given." Beth said soberly.

"Or was it what was taken from me the past fifteen years?" Paul asked defensively.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Beth asked warily.

"I don't know. Okay? Maybe it's because of my dad. Maybe it's because of *your* dad. Maybe it's because of someone I don't even know about who wants to help me out and get me on the right track now that I know about the witch stuff. But what was *taken* was fifteen years of my life that I could have known about who and what I was."

"Paul, whatever you were given or denied is entirely my fault. No one else *owes* you anything. I am responsible; one hundred percent. This 'gift' may have some very nasty strings attached."

"Or it may not." Paul countered.

"I know that this is, like, none of my business, but if Paul didn't accept them, would they still be his familiars?" G asked cautiously.

"Yes. Under the terms of the pact, they would be, but Paul would be within his rights not to summon them." Beth said firmly.

"So, by your logic, if Paul didn't summon them, he'd still have the same 'gift' and the same obligation, right?"

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it." Beth grudgingly agreed.

"Is there another way?" G asked curiously.

"At some future time, Paul's gratitude for this 'gift' might cause him to assume motives that aren't real and open himself to being manipulated."

"Like that couldn't happen anyway. When the nice man in the van offers you some free candy, you've got to be smart enough to do what's right. With or without the familiars, Paul's going to face the same decisions." G said thoughtfully.

The puppy started yipping and barking, drawing all attention to him.

"Yes. This is G. He's my alpha." Paul responded to the puppy with a smile.

The puppy gave an excited little 'yip', then ran across the floor, ending up at G's foot.

"What's that all about?" G asked curiously.

"Mah Zah likes you. She's still my familiar, but she's decided that since you're my mate and you'll fight to defend me, that she would like to focus her attention on protecting you while Ginh Zah protects me." Paul said tenderly.

"What should I do?" G asked as he looked at the puppy trying to climb his leg.

"Try scratching her behind the ear." Paul said with a smile.

"Just remember what I've told you. This 'gift' could be used as leverage at some future time. Don't accept that this is what it appears to be on the surface." Beth warned.

"Got it, Mom." Paul said simply.

A tiny pitiful 'meow' sounded and Paul couldn't help but smile.

"Come on up here, Ginh Zah. Tell me about how things went with your friend." Paul said as he scooped up the little kitten and held her to his chest.

* * * * *

Paul sat with Gihn Zah and talked with her quietly while G enjoyed petting and cuddling Mah Zah.

Beth and D sat together enjoying a peaceful moment, watching the scene with matching contented smiles.

"Mom, I was wondering about something." Paul said quietly as he looked up from petting the kitten.

"What was that?"

"At the wedding, you were able to summon demon imps without a summoning diagram. How'd you do that?"

"That was sort of an emergency."

"I know. That's why I'm asking. Someday, I might have an emergency too."

"Listen, the technique that I used was something that I had prepared for years ago but never really intended to use. Now that I've used it, trust me when I tell you that this is one of those things that is a lot better in theory than in practice."

"But when things went wrong, you were able to use it when it really mattered. If you hadn't been able to summon demons at the wedding, things might have gone a whole lot worse."

"I don't have those spells anymore, so I can't give you any details anyway. But basically, many years ago I placed reverse summoning diagrams on each of the imps so that I could activate them and call upon them in an emergency."

"Like an enchantment?"

"More like a tattoo."

"But how would that even work? Doesn't the summoning diagram have to be big enough for the demons to pass through?"

"Yes and no. Having an adequate sized portal is the *humane* way of summoning." Beth said gravely.

"So you sucked the imps through a pinhole from their realm into ours?"

"More of a keyhole, but yes. The pain that it must have caused them had to have been beyond description." Beth said grimly.

"But when they got here, they fought for you." Paul said slowly.

"I'm a demon summoner, no matter how injured they were, they were still bound to follow my commands."

Gihn Zah looked up at Paul and meowed sternly.

Paul looked at her for a moment, then softly responded, "Yeah. If you were in danger, I'd want to be able to help you too."

"Leaving that aside, the magic needed to perform that type of summoning is... problematic. Basically, if I hadn't been afraid for all our lives, I wouldn't have been able to activate the reverse summoning spells."

"But I still don't understand how you could do that at all. I mean, how could you breach their realm to activate their reverse summoning spells without your own summoning diagram in this realm?"

"When I cast the 'tattoo' spell on the imps, I cast a similar spell on myself. I have a spell diagram embedded in my flesh. I can open enough of a doorway into their realm to call on them, activate their reverse summonings and draw them through to me."

"Can I see it?"

"It's magical. It isn't visible to the naked eye."

"I can see the spells embedded in my numerology book and the spells on charms. I can probably see your diagram too."

Beth held her left hand out to her son, so that he could examine the back of it.

Paul looked at her hand for a moment, then slowly asked, "Vrezixus?"

"You *can* see it?" Beth asked with surprise.

"Yeah. When you were done with your imps, did you send them back there?" Paul asked curiously, remembering that he had been otherwise occupied at that time.

"Later that night, I did. But, of course, I returned them with a full sized diagram."

Gihn Zah meowed, then continued with a long murmuring growl as Paul listened carefully.

Finally, Paul looked away from the kitten and asked, "What about 'lending' magic? Do you know anything about that?"

"That's a very dangerous technique. Not only does it have the capacity of being misused, but it also leaves you completely vulnerable, since your own magic is tied into the spell and completely out of your control."

Paul slowly nodded as he considered his mother's answer.

"As much as I would love to stay in here with all of you, the fact of the matter is that I still have quite a bit of work to do." D said regretfully.

"Thanks for coming to help me when you did. It really means a lot to me." Paul said quietly.

"I may not be around you every minute of the day, but I'll try to always be there when you need me." D said as he got up from the couch.

"If you ever need me, I'll be there for you too." Paul said earnestly.

"Don't forget, we've got our own stuff to do." G reluctantly whispered.

"Yeah. I have the feeling that if we let ourselves get behind, we'll never get caught up." Paul agreed.

"What do you want to do about..." G trailed off as he looked down at Mah Zah, curled into a ball in his open palms.

"We'll take them with us. I'll send them home before we go to bed."

"Paul, I can tell that you're thinking about the reverse summoning tattoo spell. There's no way that I'll be able to stop you if you're determined to do it. But before you take that step, keep in mind that if you decide to go through with it and ever have to use it, you'll hate yourself for it. I can promise you that."

"Okay Mom. I'm listening to you."

"Good." Beth said seriously, then gently added, "In case I don't see you again tonight, have a good sleep."

"You too, Mom." Paul said with a smile at her.

After the somewhat tense back-and-forth, it pleased him to know that they were still on good terms.

* * * * *

"What are you working on next?" G asked as they walked back to G's room.

"I've got to do some alchemy research to see if we can convert potential energy the same way we convert manifested energy, like fire. If I can find a way to make that work, then I have to dig into the basic magic book and see if I can get any clues on binding the energy and the spell to the charm."

"It sounds like you're not sure if you can do it."

"From the little bit I've learned about how things work, it seems like there should be a way, but I can't be sure that I'll find it." Paul said frankly.

"Remember that if you get stuck really bad, you can always ask our parents. Even if they don't know the answers, they might have some different ideas of where to look for them."

"I probably wouldn't have thought to ask them for help, but if I can't find what I'm looking for, it might come down to that." Paul said thoughtfully, then asked, "Are you going to be working on Lex tonight?"

"Yeah. I've only got until Friday and I've still got a long way to go before he's ready."

"I may need to get into the online library later. If you're going to be busy, maybe you could set me up now."

"Sure. Do you want it on my computer or the laptop?"

"The laptop. I don't think I'll be using it for anything else, so that leaves your computer free for whatever else either of us might need it for."

"What about these guys?" G asked as he indicated the puppy that he was still holding.

"You can keep holding her or put her down. Whatever works best for you."

"I think I'll try holding her. Maybe she'll inspire me."

Gihn Zah meowed and Paul immediately responded, "I'll tell you all about what I'm doing as soon as the computer's set up."

* * * * *

"Paul."

"Hmm?"

"You know how you were asking your mom those questions about her summoning."

"Yeah. Maybe I coulda been nicer to her."

"I think you were fine, but you asking those questions got me to thinking, how did *you* summon a demon at the wedding without a spell or a summoning circle?"

"I don't know." Paul answered honestly.

"But now that you're learning what a demon summoner does and how things work, can't you look back on that, at what you did, and see something more now?"

"Not really." Paul said slowly, then explained, "Doing the diagrams and weaving the spells is nothing like what I did at the wedding. The magic that I used... it felt like I magically *punched* a hole in reality and broke through to a hell dimension and I'm not talking about one of the nicer ones either, like where Gihn Zah and Mah Zah come from."

"So there are a lot of different hells. I kinda always thought that there was just the one."

"I learned a little bit about that while I was looking for Gihn Zah and Mah Zah's realm, but I don't know everything. From what I could make of it, there are a bunch of different layers of reality. Some are flooded with bright energy, some are flooded with dark and just a few are like this plane, with only slight occasional influences of

either type of energy. The dark realms are collectively called hell and the bright realms are heaven."

"And when your mom opened that portal tonight, you found out that you can never go to heaven. How do you feel about that?" G asked cautiously.

"I think you're looking at it like 'good and evil'. They're just two different realms with competing and incompatible types of energy. My dad was a demon so I guess it's no surprise that I have demonic energy in me. When I tried to enter a celestial plane, my flesh and blood was incompatible with the energy of that realm and... you saw what happened. I guess the same thing would probably happen if someone from a heavenly realm tried to enter a hell dimension." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Are there any half-angels running around?" G asked curiously.

"They're called Nephilim, but I don't know if any exist today. I don't see any reason why there wouldn't be." Paul said honestly.

"How's your project going?"

"I'm not sure. I've come up with a few things, and they seem like they should work but I really don't have any way of trying them out. You don't happen to know any thaumaturgy binding spells, do you?"

"No. I don't have any talent for that, so I never learned any of their spells."

"Well, whether I have talent or not, I need to find a way to regulate the flow of magical energy to fuel the spell or this will burn out about two seconds after I cast it."

"That's not something I've ever had to worry about. Although from what I've heard there are some advanced sorcery spells that can be made permanent, so that the illusion stays even after you leave, I've never had to power any of my spells with anything but my own magic."

"Does that mean that you could make it so that Lex could hang around here while we're at school and stuff?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure what you have to do to make an illusion permanent. Something like that's a long way away from where I am right now."

"Yeah. Just about everything is like that for me." Paul said frankly, then asked, "Are you ready to give it a try?"

"Yeah." G said reluctantly, then took a long slow inhale to brace himself before adding, "Well, here it goes."

Paul watched as 'Lex' came into being.

This time, Lex looked quite a bit more human.

He wasn't an exact duplicate of G. In fact, no one with eyes would ever mistake one for the other. But much to G's credit, Lex looked quite a bit more *real* than he had the day before. If Paul were to run into Lex while walking down the street, he wouldn't give him a second look as being anything other than an ordinary person.

"There's still a long way to go." G said as he walked around Lex and looked at him critically.

"He looks good." Paul said gently.

"He looks generic." G countered.

Paul thought about that as he looked at Lex, then said, "Okay. Maybe he *does* look generic. But he looks like a *real live human being*. He doesn't look like he's a gargoyle or even a mannequin. Even though he's not completely finished, he's a lot better than he was yesterday."

"Okay. I'll agree with that." G slowly conceded, then asked, "Do you have anything to show from all the work you've been doing?"

"No. This is for a project in my Basic Magic class. It's something that I'm working on with a partner so I won't be able to try any of this out until we get together again on Thursday." Paul said frankly.

"What classes do you have tomorrow?"

"Let me see." Paul said as he took out his schedule. "Tech, Myth, Gym and Astro... After the classes I've had so far, I don't want to even guess at what they're actually going to be teaching." Paul said honestly.

"Are you scheduled for Tech 1 or Tech 2?"

"One."

"Then that probably means that you have little or no talent for technological magic. Tech 1 is to teach you how to use the high-tech magic tools that the techno-mages come up with."

"Oh. I really would have liked to have learned to combine magic with electronics and stuff. But I guess that I can't be good at everything."

"From what I hear, there aren't many people who make it to Tech 2. There probably aren't more than five in any given school year."

"I bet they must get paid all kinds of crazy money if they're that rare."

"I guess so. I know that Dad depends on the tech guys a lot and he bends over backward not to waste their time." G said frankly, then thought to add, "If you have Gym, you're going to need gym clothes."

"I thought that going to witch school would be different from the hell of regular school."

"I've never been to a regular school, so I don't know what your gym class there was like. But I can't imagine any way that it could be anything like *our* gym class." G said frankly.

"I guess I'll just have to wait and see." Paul relented, then asked, "Do you have some stuff I can borrow?"

"Yeah. Are you done studying for the night?"

"No, there's still another chapter that I need to go through in my basic magic book before I call it a night. So I'd better get back to it."

"Yeah. Remind me and I'll get you some gym clothes when we stop for the night. Right now, Lex looks like he still needs more attention."

"Has Mah Zah been any help?"

"Yeah. Actually, I think she was a good source of inspiration for me."

"Gihn Zah has been helping to keep me on task." Paul said seriously, then added in a conspiratorial whisper, "She's kind of a hard ass."

The kitten meowed in offense at his words.

Paul turned to her and said, "Well, you are."

* * * * *

Paul couldn't get over the sense of tranquility that he received from something as simple as having a morning routine to follow. Fortunately, G had remembered their conversation the night before and prepared a gym bag.

The ride in the school van cuddled beside G was just what Paul needed to give him a sense of security about the coming day. Knowing that he had G's support allowed Paul to face each new challenge confidently.

As they entered the magical hallway, they realized that their first classes were in opposite directions.

Paul walked to his locker, then performed the reverse of the lock spell to release the locker from its magical protection. Next he performed the '*foreign*' spell to pop the physical lock.

As he was stacking his excess books and gym bag in the locker, he thought about how he might be able to modify the locking spell to be more convenient.

As he was about to close the locker door, he changed his mind. He scooted everything away from the back wall, then he stopped for a moment to touch one finger to the back of the locker.

The text of a spell along with an eight pointed diagram appeared on the back of the locker. Paul didn't have time to linger. He closed the locker door, then enacted his newly modified version of the locking spell.

Confident that he had everything that he needed, he hurried away to his next new class.

* * * * *

"Hello. My name is Paul Darroch and I'm starting in this class today." Paul said to the youngish looking teacher at the front of the room.

"It's nice to meet you Paul. My name is Nedrick Plaven. Please feel free to call me Ned, but you can call me Mr. Plaven if you absolutely can't force yourself to see me as a person."

"It's nice to meet you, Ned." Paul said sincerely.

"Good." Mr. Plaven said with satisfaction, then turned to look at his computer.

Paul waited as Mr. Plaven seemed to be absorbed in whatever he was reading.

"So, can I assume from your recent change in status that you've just learned about magic?"

"Yes sir... Ned."

"According to the testing, it seems that you don't show any tell-tale signs of a techno-mage ability. Tell me, what is it that you hope to get out of this class?"

"A passing grade." Paul said weakly.

"Well, that's not encouraging, but I suppose that it's honest."

"I really don't know exactly what it is that you do in here, so I don't have any idea of what I should be working toward."

"Better." Mr. Plaven said with a smile, then continued, "Techno-mages work to combine the benefits of magic and technology. In this class, we try to familiarize students with the magical tools available to them in the twenty-first century."

"That sounds really great. I've been working on a report for the past couple days and it felt like, with magic, that there should be a lot easier way to do things."

"Really? Tell me about it."

"Well, since I can use magic to write as fast as I can think, it seemed like typing was the long, slow way."

"How so? Come around here and show me on my computer." Mr. Plaven said as he stood from his chair.

"Um, okay. But do you have a piece of paper I can use to show you the difference?"

Mr. Plaven took one step and pressed a button. The printer beside his desk immediately ejected a single sheet of paper.

After placing the paper on the desk, Paul slowly said, "Okay. Here's a simple alchemy spell."

He touched one finger to the edge of the paper and it filled with writing.

"If you really want me to, I can start typing that in on the computer, but it's probably going to take me at least five minutes. Do you see my problem?" Paul asked seriously.

"So you're using some sort of thought transference spell in lieu of writing?" Mr. Plaven asked cautiously.

"It's a standard spell from the numerology workbook. I just modified it a little so I could use it wherever I wanted to." Paul said honestly.

"Do you happen to have the spell where you can get to it? I'd like to see it."

Paul touched his finger to the piece of paper again. The page of writing cleared and an entirely different spell took its place.

"Like I said, it's just a really simple spell. But it's a whole lot easier to use than writing everything out longhand or typing it."

"Yes. I can see what you're saying."

"So, are there any techno-mage things like that for typing things into the computer? Or is it just my wishful thinking?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Paul, have you discussed this idea of yours with anyone else?"

"You mean using the spell from the numerology textbook? Yeah, I talked to a few people about it."

"Not that. I mean the idea of modifying this spell to work as an input method on a computer."

"No. I didn't think about it until I was talking to you."

"Give me just a moment..." Mr. Plaven said as he sat down at his computer and began typing.

Paul waited, not knowing what Mr. Plaven seemed to be so excited about.

He glanced over his shoulder at the classroom and found that everyone seemed to be engrossed in working on their own projects and didn't seem to take any notice of him at all.

"You probably don't know this, but one of the things that techno-mages do is create new magical technological tools to make people's lives easier. When one of us comes up with an original idea, we have a registry, something like the patent office, where we catalogue those ideas. If a new idea results in a new technology, then the person who came up with it will be compensated for it. Basically, that person holds the patent."

"Yeah." Paul said slowly, not seeing how that had anything to do with anything.

"I've just submitted your idea... under your name, of course. It may take a few days for the people at the bureau to determine if your idea is truly original, but if they determine that it is, then you'll reap the reward if your idea is ever developed."

"Okay. So I don't have to *do* anything?"

"Well, I suppose that since you've come up with such an interesting idea that you might decide to develop it yourself. If you can come up with a practical way to make it work, then that would make it that much more likely that you will see some financial reward from it."

"But you said that I don't have any techno-mage ability."

"You have a brain. Use it. If you need to incorporate magic into a mundane piece of technology, just ask and I'll be happy to help you with it. This is actually what this class is all about; learning to use magic and technology to its best advantage."

Paul slowly nodded.

"I'll let you in on a little secret, if you promise not to spread it around." Mr. Plaven said quietly as he leaned closer.

"What's that?"

"The people in the second tier of the techno-mage class may have magical talent for working with technology, but they couldn't come up with an original idea to save their lives."

"So they're not better than us?"

"No. They have a talent. You have a different talent. That's all."

"Okay. What do I need to do?"

"I assume that you're familiar with computers and their peripherals."

"I'm no guru or anything. I'm about average, I guess."

"That should be all you need for a while. Try a few things and see what you can make happen."

"But don't I get a textbook or something?" Paul asked cautiously.

"This isn't that kind of class. In here, if you come to me with an idea for a project and I judge it to be of merit, then I'll encourage you to work on it. Of course, if you come to me without any ideas, then I'll pick a project for you, like creating a sentient toaster or some other harmless thing."

"But what about grades and testing?"

"You're graded on the work you do. Every day is its own test." Mr. Plaven said seriously, then added, "Unless you have an even better idea, this is going to be your project for this class for the entire year. Whether or not you're able to bring it to fruition doesn't matter. What you're learning is how to take an idea and develop it."

"But the numerology spell is someone else's. I can't take credit for their work."

"Each of us stands on the shoulders of those who came before us. Credit will be given where credit is due, but don't let that hold you back from taking the magic and technology to the next level."

"Okay. I'll do it... except that I don't know what I'm supposed to do now."

"Do you see that workbench over there? Gather what you need from the supply room and start working on ways to make your magically altered input device. If you need my help, whether it be magical or just to brainstorm, all you have to do is ask."

"And I've got all year to work on this?"

"I've had one student complete eight projects in the course of a year. I've had others who haven't been able to finish one. You're here to learn how to develop your ideas. As long as you're doing that, you'll get the appropriate grade."

"Thank you, Ned. I understand."

* * * * *

When the class bell rang, Paul checked his schedule to see where his next class was located.

As luck would have it, the next class was practically across the hall.

He was one of the first to walk into the classroom and saw the teacher sitting behind his desk, reading.

"My name is Paul Darroch. I'm starting this class today." Paul said quietly, hesitant to interrupt.

The teacher slowly looked up from his book and asked, "Has anyone warned you about my class yet?"

"No sir. I haven't heard a thing about it." Paul said honestly.

The fiftyish pot-bellied man chuckled, then said, "I must be slipping."

Paul waited, not knowing what, if anything, he should say in response.

The man slowly stood, then offered his hand as he said, "It's nice to meet you Paul. I'm Franklin Cox. This class is called Mythology Studies, but it could just as well be called Ancient Religions or Historical Belief Systems. Whatever you call it, in this class we study what people have believed and speculate as to why that is."

"Do you just study this plane of existence or do you also cover the belief systems of other realms?" Paul asked curiously.

"What do you know about other realms?" Mr. Cox asked curiously.

"That they exist, mostly. I've heard that there's one of the hell dimensions that has a church... that's kind of a freaky concept." Paul said frankly.

"I tend to focus more on the historical belief systems of *this* realm. That alone is a topic so vast that it's hard to do it justice in a single school year."

"Yeah. It sounds really interesting. But I'd like to learn about the other realms too. Do you know of a website or a book or anything where I could find more information about that?"

"I think I can do you one better. Every six weeks I require a report to be submitted detailing the historical practices and belief structures of a different civilization." Mr. Cox said as he handed Paul a piece of paper.

Paul glanced at the paper and saw that it was a list of requirements for the report that Mr. Cox was talking about.

"If you would like, you may study the belief system of any civilization in any realm you choose and once you've decided on the realm, I will provide you references to appropriate resources."

"Thank you Mr. Cox. I'd really like that."

"Well, before you get too excited, there is also a lecture portion of the class. If you'll have a seat, I'm going to tell you a little story about the Aboriginal people and the development of their belief systems over time."

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

When the bell rang, Paul quickly looked at his schedule to confirm what he already knew. The location of his locker was exactly opposite the location of the gym, where his next class was being held.

Most of the other students had already left the room, and the last few still in the room were in the process of gathering their things to leave.

Paul flashed back on Nazzy's advice, 'Sometimes it's better to ask forgiveness than permission.'

In the air before him, Paul manifested an eight-pointed summoning diagram, which contained a reverse summoning diagram inside it. He knew that there was no way he could use the diagram to reach another realm since the spell for that was insanely complicated. But he was confident that he could use it to reach a few hallways over, creating a fully traversable portal to his locker."

As soon as the blurry gray distortion appeared, Paul reached through and grabbed his gym bag and replaced it with his backpack.

He dispelled the portal, then noticed that Mr. Cox was watching him.

"Sorry." Paul muttered shyly before dashing out of the room.

* * * * *

Although Paul wasn't sure exactly what they were going to be doing, he had been to enough gym classes to know that things would go best if he simply suited up before even checking in with the teacher.

When Paul walked into the locker room, he found everyone in various states of dress, changing into their gym clothes. Paul followed suit and no one seemed to take notice of him.

As everyone finished changing, they left the locker room, mostly as a group, and walked onto the basketball court.

Paul spotted the teacher and hurried over to introduce himself.

"Excuse me, sir. My name is Paul Darroch and I'm starting this class today." Paul said as he approached.

"Have they warned you about it yet?" The man asked with an evil grin.

"No. No one's warned me about anything." Paul said cautiously.

"Okay. First of all, my name is Spencer Tran. You can call me Spence or Coach, but please don't call me Coach Tran. It just sounds weird to me. Anyway... warnings. Let's see. Are you sure that no one's told you anything?"

"Not a word."

"Since you're starting in the middle of the school year, I'm guessing that you just found out about the whole magical world thing."

"Yeah."

"Okay. Have you ever played dodgeball before?"

"Yeah. A few times. Until they outlawed it or something like that."

"Well, that's what we're playing today."

"Really? I kinda thought that witches... I don't know what I thought... I just didn't expect you to be playing dodgeball."

"The rules have been slightly modified and we *do* insist on common sense and good sportsmanship. You can't magically attack another player or destroy the ball. No spells that alter time or dimensions or warp reality outside the boundaries of the playing field are allowed. Besides that, have fun."

"So we can use our magic?" Paul asked in surprise.

"Yes. Use it to defend yourself, but also use it cleverly to overcome your opponents." The coach said with a sly smile.

"And besides all that, it's just the regular dodgeball rules?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yes. Oh, and the boundaries of the playing field extend fifteen feet above ground and fifteen feet below... just in case that comes into play."

"Okay. I think I'm ready." Paul said as he looked around.

"Everyone! Take the court! We're about to begin."

Chapter 7

"The reason we're doing this is not only so you can learn to use your abilities in an emergency situation, but also to get you used to moderating your abilities to use only the level of response that the situation warrants. Keep that in mind." The coach said to the whole group as they assembled in the middle of the court.

"Kristie, Dex, Monica, Otto and Morton. You'll be our first team." The coach said, then indicated one side of the court.

"Paul, Callista, Karas, Zanner and Berna. You'll be our second. Everyone else, leave the court and you'll be included in the next round."

Since the first group had already retreated to one side of the court, Paul automatically walked to the other small group that was forming a line behind a red rubber ball.

"When you take a hit, I'll call you out. Immediately leave the court. If anyone attacks a player who is out of play, you'll also be out. Remember, we're not here to hurt each other, we're here to have fun."

Paul looked around and recognized a few people from his other classes. However, the only one that he knew by name was the redheaded boy, Dex, from the van.

The coach blew his whistle and chaos erupted.

* * * * *

"If you get the ball, go for the long haired girl first. She's telekinetic and can make the ball go wherever she wants. She's deadly at this game." The girl beside Paul said quickly as two other members of their team raced forward to try and get the balls in the middle of the court.

The court was bigger than was standard and Paul looked around quickly to see who had a ball.

Out of the corner of his eye, Paul saw a ball coming at him, seemingly out of nowhere. More out of reflex than thought, Paul caught the ball.

The coach blew the whistle, then called, "Monica! You're out!"

Paul saw a girl walk off the court and wondered how she had been able to throw a ball anywhere near him.

"Hurry! Get Kristie!" Paul's teammate told him urgently.

There wasn't much that Paul could do but throw his ball as hard as he could, trying to tag the long haired girl out. He didn't know if she were 'Kristie' or not, but he didn't have time to question.

Before the ball could find its target, Paul spotted another ball speeding toward him. He was off balance from his throw and couldn't turn himself in time to catch it.

With a lack of other available options, Paul pulled up a stone wall between him and the ball.

"Nice trick!" The girl said as she ran after the ball that bounced off his wall.

"Thanks. I'm Paul." He said as he dispelled his wall.

"Callista." She said as she heaved the ball toward the long haired girl that Paul assumed to be 'Kristie'.

"We need a plan if we're going to beat them." Paul said as he took stock of who had balls ready to throw.

"I can kick up some wind or rain if I need to, but I don't think that will help us very much." Callista said frankly.

"Can you do snow?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Yeah. But not enough to really do anything." Callista regretfully informed him.

"It doesn't matter. My only 'plan' is to distract them, then hit them with everything we've got. The only thing I can really do fast is Wizard Lights. Do we have anyone else who can do anything showy?" Paul asked, then noticed a ball flying wildly, zigzagging in his general direction.

"Not really. Zanner grows plants. Karras summons ghostly wisps and Berna can turn herself into a wallaby." Callista said quickly.

Paul suddenly realized that the ball that was threatening to hit him was now veering wildly toward Callista instead. He threw up a stone wall in its path and collected the ball after its first bounce.

"Thanks." Callista said gratefully.

Paul heard rather than saw a ball impact another of his teammates.

The whistle sounded, then the coach called, "Zanner! You're out!"

"We're down one person. If we're going to do this, we need to do it now." Paul said anxiously.

"Give your ball to Karras, then do what you're going to do." Callista said to Paul, then called out to their teammates, "We're going to make a distraction. Hit them before they can realize what's going on."

Paul tossed his ball to the black haired boy and was about to create a flurry of wizard lights, raining down on the opposing team when he had a better idea.

Taking a page from G's book, he made a dramatic lifting gesture with both hands as he created a summoning diagram big enough to encompass the entire opposing team. Truth be told, the diagram wasn't at all difficult to conjure, but the dramatic gestures contributed to his distraction. Once the diagram was fully formed, balls of fire erupted at each of the five points of the pentagram.

While all this was going on, a literal blizzard erupted above them.

"Go!" Callista called out, prompting their remaining teammates, Karras and Berna, to take action.

The light of the spell diagram grew brighter as the floor seemed to disappear, replaced by an endless black void beneath them.

The coach's whistle drew Paul's attention and he heard the coach say, "Kristie, you're out!"

Paul released his magic and let the spell diagram fade into nothingness as Callista stopped her blizzard.

"Next time, let me get in on the distraction. That looked like fun." Karras said with a grin.

"We took out their heavy hitter. I think that we can settle the rest of this the old fashioned way." Callista said frankly.

"Yeah." Karras said, then dodged a ball that had been lobbed at him.

* * * * *

The dodgeball games continued on for a while. Paul was able to sit out a few rounds so that everyone had a chance to play.

He couldn't ever remember enjoying a gym class quite as much. It wasn't just the ability to use magic that made the difference, but also the insistence on sportsmanship and fun.

At his old schools, a game of dodgeball probably would have devolved into the weakest students in the class being pummelled mercilessly by the strongest.

As they left the court, Paul saw Dex and said, "Good game. You've got some strong moves."

"Thanks." Dex said quietly and wouldn't meet Paul's eyes.

Although Paul would have been more than willing to engage in a conversation, Dex didn't seem to be up to it, so Paul let it go.

Once inside the locker room, Paul was surprised to realize that he actually *needed* a shower.

In most of his gym classes before, he didn't even break a sweat. Truth be told, he was usually bored.

After stripping down, Paul wore his towel into the shower room where three other guys were already showering.

"Paul! That was an awesome summoning circle that you cast. Was that for real?" Karras asked enthusiastically.

"Mostly, yeah." Paul said as he hung up his towel, then went to the shower beside Karras'.

"I think you scared the shit out of all of them when you did that." Karras chuckled.

Paul started the water of his shower before saying, "That diagram didn't have any of the details that would have actually made it work. It was just for show. But if I were doing it for real, I would have started out with a diagram something like that one."

"I do spirit summoning, so I was pretty sure that it wasn't just made up."

Paul turned and saw Dex walk into the shower room, wrapped in a towel and looking incredibly uncomfortable.

Rather than making it worse by addressing him, Paul looked back to Karras and said, "Professor Ortega seemed to be impressed by my spell diagram. I mean, it's not like it's that complicated or anything, but he was impressed that I was able to come up with something like that on my first day."

"I can see how you do it, but with all the manipulations you must have to make to the wizard's lights, I think it'd just be easier to draw it out with chalk." Karras said frankly.

Paul's curiosity got the better of him and he couldn't help but glance in Dex's direction. What he saw somewhat stunned him. Dex's skin was incredibly pale and the only body hair that he appeared to have was a puff of bright orange pubic hair. The expanse of pale smooth skin made Paul think of an exquisite and fragile porcelain doll.

"I'm not sure why it's easier for me to use the spell, but I can see what you're saying." Paul said as he dragged his gaze back to Karras. In contrast to Dex, Karras appeared to have a 'natural tan' and an abundance of body hair which was made that much more apparent by being wet.

"Something wrong?" Karras asked cautiously.

Paul realized that he'd been staring and said, "I just noticed how hairy you are. I'm not used to seeing that with someone our age."

"Yeah. When my dad takes off his shirt, it looks like he's wearing a sweater underneath. Really gross." Karras said frankly.

"I didn't mean to say it like it was something bad. It just caught my attention." Paul said honestly.

"You'd better not let your boyfriend find out that you're checking out the other guys in the locker room. He might get jealous." Karras said with a teasing smile.

"You know about G?" Paul asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I work with Vinda in Wizardry Class. She told us all about you." Karras said simply, then turned off the water of his shower.

Paul followed suit, then walked with him to the hooks where the towels were hanging.

"I didn't know that she was talking about me." Paul said honestly.

"She only told us good things." Karras assured him.

"So you're a ghost summoner, like Vinda?" Paul asked as he dried himself.

"Not exactly. Vinda goes for the full-fledged ghosts of *people*. I'm more of a wisp and vapor summoner. It's not as showy and impressive, but I can call up about eight wisps in the time that she can summon one of her fully manifested people-ghosts." Karras said frankly, then tilted his head, silently asking if Paul were finished drying off.

Paul walked with Karras into the changing area and went to his gym bag to start to dress as he asked, "So aren't the things you summon the ghosts of people too?"

"*Technically*, yes. At least, I think so. But what I summon is more like manifestations of residual energy or lost spirit fragments." Karras said as he dressed himself.

Both Paul and Karras were quiet for a moment as they finished dressing and took stock of their appearance.

Once assured that he was presentable, Paul gathered his gym clothes and towel back into his gym bag.

"What class do you have next?" Karras asked curiously.

"Astrology." Paul said simply, then created a vertical glowing spell diagram beside him, floating in the air.

"I've got potions." Karras said distractedly as he watched Paul reach through the diagram and pull out a backpack.

"You've created a pocket dimension?" Karras asked slowly.

Paul smiled and said, "No. This is just a portal to my locker."

"From what Vinda said, you just learned about magic last week."

"Yeah. This isn't as impressive as it looks. The spell that I borrowed this from is *way* more complex than anything that I can do. I just took the parts that I could use and put them together with what I already know, to make this work." Paul said as he put his gym bag into his locker.

"Still, that's really something for your first week."

"It's about time to go. I'll see you in Wizardry after lunch."

"Yeah. I'll see you then."

* * * * *

As Paul walked into the classroom, he was amazed by all the charts and planetary models. Some appeared to be ancient while others looked modern.

He walked to the front of the room and cautiously approached the teacher.

"Excuse me, but I'm starting this class today. My name is Paul Darroch."

"Yes. I saw your name on the roster. I'm Mrs. Tabbert, welcome to Astrology."

"Thank you." Paul said cautiously.

"Seeing as you're starting mid-term I'm guessing that you don't have any idea of what you're doing here."

"No ma'am. Not a clue."

"Good. I would rather have someone who starts off knowing nothing than those who come in here thinking that they already know it all."

Paul couldn't think of a response to that, so he waited for her to tell him what he needed to know.

"Have you been able to perform any magic yet?"

"Yes. I've done a few things... you know, beginner stuff." Paul said a bit nervously.

"Yes. Well, if you've been using magic at a beginner's level, I doubt that you've had time to notice the ebb and flow of magical energies." Mrs. Tabbert said seriously.

"No ma'am. Most of what I've done doesn't take much magic at all."

"Yes. Well then, what, if anything, do you know about the source of your magic?" Mrs. Tabbert asked curiously.

"It depends on what you mean by 'know', because usually if I know something I understand it, and I don't understand magic at all. But as far as where my magic

comes from, it depends on what magic you're talking about. I use different magic for different things."

"Oh really? Do tell."

"Um, okay. I've been warned not to talk about this, but I can't really answer your question without saying it..." Paul trailed off uncertainly.

"Go ahead, you've piqued my curiousity."

"Well, I'm a cambion. I'm guessing that, because of that, my flesh and blood is part demon. Some of the magic that I do calls on demonic energy to do my bidding and bend to my will. But my mom's a witch, so part of my magic is human... or witch... or from this realm... I don't know the right words for everything yet, but I think you know what I'm trying to say."

"Yes. Do go on."

"Well, there are some spells that I use that don't call on demonic magic, they call on 'normal' magic. The magic feels different and has to be handled differently. It's like... for normal magic there's a set of laws. You do this thing and that thing automatically happens. You don't have to 'convince' it to work."

"I suppose that's as accurate an explanation as I've heard of it. What about the celestial powers? Do you have any sense of how they work?"

"No. I think that because of my demonality, I won't ever be able to use angelic magic. I can't even get the taste of it because it would probably kill me."

"That may be true." Mrs. Tabbert said thoughtfully, then continued, "Much like demonic magic, angelic magic is most influenced by the spellcaster's emotions. Where demonic magic requires strength and dominance, angelic magic is fueled by longing and unfulfilled desire. Angelic spells tend to be long and flowery, filled with romance and songs of praise to beg and entreat 'the powers that be' to grant them the power for their spells."

"It sounds revolting." Paul said without thinking, then repentantly followed with, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Tabbert."

"Quite alright. And to be honest, it *is* a bit revolting." Mrs. Tabbert said with a restrained smile, then added, "But no more revolting than watching those who perform demonic magic bully and threaten their way into getting what they want."

Paul nodded his easy acceptance of what she was saying.

"Be that as it may, what this class tends to focus on is the ever shifting balance of forces at work in the universes. One astrological configuration will provide more power to one type of magic than another. As the zodiac moves through the different

houses, extra powers can be sought and attained if one is aware of their own personal position in the dynamic."

Paul thought for a moment, then cautiously asked, "So is that why it feels like the different realms are always in motion in relation to each other?"

"Yes. That's exactly right. In fact, some realms can become unreachable during certain astrological phases. Likewise, some dimensions literally overlay our own during certain high holy days. The veil becomes so thin that even a mundane person can sometimes peer through."

"So this class teaches us how to... do what? Understand the ebb and flow of our powers?" Paul guessed.

"If that's all you took away from it, I believe it would be worth the time invested. But with study, you can also discover wells of power that you can tap into to augment your magic and perform spells that normally wouldn't be possible for you."

"So, for example, if I had a big magic project to do that used demonic magic and I knew that Vrezixus was close to this dimension and moving closer, I could somehow call on power from that realm to make my spell work?"

"No. Not precisely. You're thinking too small." Mrs. Tabbert said slowly. "Try thinking of *all* the demonic realms being caught in a whirlpool, constantly swirling. We're not thinking of a specific demonic realm amongst them but rather, we're looking at them as a whole. The Demon, Angel and Nature realms are constantly in motion. Astrology is the study of that motion."

"But is that all?" Paul asked slowly.

"Isn't that enough?" Mrs. Tabbert asked with a chuckle.

"No. I mean, are there only three types of realms or are there others that we just don't have access to?"

"Who's to say? Perhaps there is another realm where creatures exist who set all of this into motion and populated the realms with the beings who now live there."

"Like a pantheon of gods?"

"Such things have been speculated." Mrs. Tabbert said cautiously, then added, "But it's important to be aware that each realm also has their own 'gods', beings of superior power who oversee the administration of their own realms."

"Even here, in the natural realm?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yes. We happen to have a very enlightening class on that subject, called Mythology. I think that if you approach it with the right frame of mind you might be able to find at least a few of the answers that you're seeking." Mrs. Tabbert said

warmly, then thought to add, "From what we've discussed thus far, I can assume that your primary study is in wizardry. That being the case, consider that if you know who, what and where you are in relation to the motion of the universe, you'll be in a much better position to navigate."

Paul's eyes went wide at the suggestion.

"But for now, why don't you go and take a seat. We need to start class."

Paul turned and was surprised to see that all the students had taken their places and were waiting, mostly quietly, to be told what to do.

"Everyone! Thank you for your patience. Now, would the scorpios please come to the front of the room? Geminis, you can put your heads down and relax for a few minutes if you would like, this won't have anything to do with you."

For the remainder of the class, Paul was nothing less than enthralled.

* * * * *

"So? How was your day?" G asked as he walked up to Paul and hugged him firmly.

After a moment to consider, Paul finally concluded, "It was good."

"Did the gym class go okay? I got to thinking about it and I should have warned you..."

"It was fine. We played dodgeball."

"Did you win?"

"My team won a few rounds. We also lost a couple. But either way, I had fun."

G pulled out of the hug and looked Paul in the eyes before slowly asking, "Who are you and what have you done with Paul?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Paul laughed.

"It means that you don't do *fun*. You do contentment and happiness and whatever that is when we cuddle, you do all of that just fine, but *fun*? The most I can see you doing is *analyzing* fun."

"Okay. Maybe I don't do fun well... or often. But that doesn't mean that I can't do it. Maybe I'm just finally in a place where I feel like I *can* have fun. No one's going to tease me or put me down for doing something silly... or maybe it's because I feel secure enough here that even if someone *did* tease me, I wouldn't care."

"Is this where you two have been? Are we going to lunch or what?" Nazzy asked as he and Vinda approached.

"Yeah. G was just telling me how not fun I am." Paul said with a teasing grin.

"G's the fun one. You're the serious one. That's why it works." Nazzy said simply, then added, "Let's go!"

As Paul and G started to walk, side by side, G quietly said, "I wasn't complaining. I like you just the way you are."

"I know."

* * * * *

When they walked into the lunchroom, Curtis waved from their usual table.

The group made their food selections, then joined Curtis.

"How are things going today?" Paul asked curiously.

"One of the guys in my second period class got suspended. It looks like he may get expelled." Curtis said frankly.

"Really? What did he do?" Paul asked curiously.

"What I heard is, that he brought some pot to school and was trying to sell it."

"Really? I've been to a few schools that were actually the drug distribution centers for the entire community. Is getting caught with some weed really that big of a deal here?"

Before Curtis could respond, G interjected, "This is a private school. Going here is a privilege, not a right. If you can't follow the rules, you'll be asked to leave. It's that simple."

"We're held to a higher standard. But in exchange, we receive a better than average education. I think it's worth it." Nazzy added seriously.

"I never looked at it that way before, but you're right. I like this place and I've probably learned more since I've been here than at my last two years in public school." Curtis said thoughtfully.

Paul nodded, then slowly said, "It's like after all these years, I'm finally getting *started* learning. Just think of where I might be right now if I'd started doing this back in kindergarten."

"You'd probably be right here with us. Where you belong." G said simply.

"Yeah. So don't worry about it." Nazzy interjected.

Curtis laughed, then said, "I can see why you hang out with these guys."

"So, Paul, how are you doing with your *volunteering* problem? Did you take on any new projects today?" Vinda asked curiously.

"No." Paul said immediately, then cautiously revised, "Well, not really. I mean, I was going to have to do reports and projects anyway. I just kinda decided what I'm going to be doing them on."

"I'll take that as a 'yes'." Vinda said with a grin.

"What classes?" Curtis asked curiously.

"Technology and Mythology." Paul said simply.

G, Nazzy and Vinda all looked at Paul with warning.

"Mythology?" Curtis asked curiously.

"Yeah. Right now we're studying the aboriginal people and their traditional beliefs." Paul said simply.

"Oh, wow! That sounds really boring." Curtis said frankly.

"I think the class is about trying to understand what different groups of people believe and why. I've only had one class, so it's too early to tell."

"I don't think I've heard of that class before."

"It's a big school and there are a lot of little classes. As many classes as I take every week, I know that there are a lot more that I'd *like* to take." G interjected.

"Yeah. As much as I whine about it, I like most of my classes too. Even the ones I don't like, I can understand why I have to take them. They all teach stuff that I'll need to know or that will help me figure things out when I get out of here." Curtis said thoughtfully.

"Exactly." Paul said with a smile at Curtis, then added, "And I think that understanding *why* people believe what they believe might be a good thing to learn. When I'm having to deal with people in everyday life, it might help me to know where they're coming from."

"So, what's your next class?" Curtis asked between bites of food.

"It's a lab class. One of my lab partners has to present her work to the teacher, so there probably won't be anything for me to do. I'll just watch and listen and if she screws up, I'll do what I can to help her fix it."

"After lunch, my 'Applied Studies' class is going into town. We're going to be visiting a bank and talking to a loan officer. That's the fun part. After that we're probably going to be calculating the APR on loans and all kinds of other stuff that we've done in class to show how the math works in the real world."

"At least you'll be able to leave the school for a little bit. That should be nice." Vinda said encouragingly.

"Yeah. I'm not complaining. It's going to be great. It just seems like a lot of work for something that I'll probably never use."

"Most people need loans to get a car, a house or to start a business. Chances are that this is something that you probably *will* use, over and over again for most of the rest of your life." G said honestly.

"Just because you don't need to know it right now doesn't mean that you don't need to know it." Nazzy added with a nod.

"Remember why your parents are paying the extra money to send you here. They want you to get a good education so that when you go out on your own, you'll have the knowledge and skills to function in the world. I think that this is a direct example of that." Paul said earnestly.

"I guess I need to get my head in the game." Curtis said thoughtfully.

"Remember, even though they do all kinds of stuff to help and prepare us for life, in the end it's up to us to keep ourselves motivated. If you don't care, nothing they do can *make* you care." G said honestly.

"Yeah. The day you graduate, you won't have anyone taking you by the hand and telling you what you need to do next. From then on, it's all up to you. College, work, family... those are all decisions that you're going to have to make..." Nazzy said seriously until he was interrupted.

"...or not." Vinda said quickly. "Choosing not to decide is still a choice. And letting things slide and just *happen* is probably the worst thing you can do for yourself. You're being given the tools, but it's up to you to put them to use. If you let them rust in your toolbox, then everything that your parents hoped to achieve by sending you here will be lost."

"Do you guys work for the school or something?" Curtis asked with a barely restrained smile.

"We just know how important this is." G responded with a grin.

Paul nodded his agreement, then said, "We're at a point right now where we can choose a path that leads to success or a path that leads to mediocrity. Work or play. Be serious or do the minimum required. Whatever any of us choose, we have to own it. We won't be able to blame the parents or the school for not preparing us."

"That's a good point. The time is now. If you put it off until tomorrow, then it will never get done. Tomorrow's always there, promising to happen but never actually happening." G said frankly.

"So I should be excited about calculating APRs?" Curtis asked dubiously.

"No! But be interested. Ask questions. Learn what they're trying to teach you. Try to get something out of the experience that they're providing for you." G implored him to understand.

"Do you think it's fun for your teacher to do something like this? Do you think it's fun for the administrator to arrange transportation? What about the guy at the bank giving a talk? Would *you* like to give a talk to a bunch of teenagers who obviously don't give a shit?" Vinda asked challengingly.

Curtis slowly nodded as he processed what they were saying.

"It's about that time." Vinda warned as she looked at the clock.

"I hope that you'll enjoy your field trip, Curtis. I didn't mean to get all preachy. It's just that since I've been here, I can understand what it's like to be given an opportunity that you never had before. I don't want for you to miss out on it." Paul urged him to understand.

Curtis smiled as he said, "My parents are always warning me about peer pressure. If they only knew..."

Nazzy, Vinda and G laughed at the statement as they got up from the table.

Once they were alone, Paul quietly asked, "Are you okay? Are those guys still bothering you?"

"Not too much. I got called an 'oreo', but believe me, I've been called a whole lot worse." Curtis said with a grin.

"Let me know if it starts bothering you, okay?" Paul asked seriously.

"What are you going to do about it?" Curtis challenged.

"I'm in good with the school administrator. If I tell her that there's a problem, I think that she'll see that it's taken care of."

"Don't do anything like that. It's just guys being assholes." Curtis said quickly.

"I'll leave it up to you to handle. But let me know if there's a problem. We're here to learn, not to be jerked around by the next generation of convenience store workers." Paul said honestly.

Curtis looked at him strangely for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "I know it sounds awful, but for some reason, picturing that makes me feel a lot better."

"Living well is the best revenge." Paul said, then indicated that he was ready to leave.

* * * * *

Upon exiting the cafeteria, Curtis and Paul said their goodbyes and left in opposite directions to go to their next classes.

As expected, G, Nazzy and Vinda were waiting for Paul just inside the magic hallway.

"Do you have anything big planned for wizardry today?" Vinda asked curiously as they walked.

"No. I did my big presentation yesterday. I think that today I'll do some reading about the basics of summoning. There's still a lot that I don't know and I'd like to understand."

"I kinda just thought you instinctively knew things, since it all seems to come so easily to you." Nazzy said frankly.

"I have some instincts, but they won't do me much good if I don't understand how it all works. I at least need to learn the vocabulary to explain what it is that I'm doing... or trying to do." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Paul. Did you survive the astrology okay?" A voice asked from behind them.

Paul turned and smiled.

"Hi Karras, do you already know everyone?" Paul asked as Karras caught up to them.

"Yeah. How are you guys doing today?"

"We're good. I'm guessing that you already met Paul." Nazzy said speculatively.

"Yeah. We were on the same team in gym." Karras said frankly, then broke into a grin as he added, "Then we showered together."

G's eyes went wide at the announcement.

"While that's *technically* true, you don't need to make it sound like something it wasn't. I mean, it's not like I washed your back... or your front." Paul said playfully.

G looked from Paul to Karras and back, looking for some sort of an explanation as to what had happened.

"Don't worry about it, G. I'm just playing." Karras chuckled at his expression.

After a moment to consider, G finally said, "I'm not worried. If I can't trust Paul when he's out of my sight, then I shouldn't be with him at all."

Paul turned to Nazzy and asked, "Who was the fun one again?"

"I might have to reconsider that." Nazzy chuckled.

"I have to go to my sorcery class now. It's almost that time." G said as he walked up to Paul and pulled him into a firm hug.

"Have a good class. I'll see you after school." Paul said, then gave G a longer than average kiss.

Nazzy, Vinda and Karras shared a look, as if to say 'aww, isn't that cute'.

When Paul finally ended the kiss, he whispered, "We'll shower together tonight. I promise."

"I can't wait." G whispered in return.

G forced himself to release Paul, then looked regretfully at him one last time before hurrying away.

* * * * *

As Paul, Karras, Nazzy and Vinda walked toward their next class at a slower pace, Karras quietly said, "I'm sorry if I made things difficult for you. I didn't mean anything, I was just messing around."

"It's alright. I think you just caught G off guard." Paul said simply, then added, "He knows that I love him and that I'd never give him a reason not to trust me."

"Wow. In the last year I've seen people pairing off all around me, and I've even been a little bit jealous of some of them. But one of the things that made me not want to even try to find someone was all the insecurity and drama. They'll be all lovey dovey one minute and at each other's throats the next." Karras said thoughtfully as they walked.

"Yeah. Just like everything else in life, we're all trying to figure things out. G and I may not have all the answers, but I think we're in a good place. Not only do we love each other, but we also *like* each other. We enjoy doing things together, but we can also spend time apart if we want to and not be miserable about it." Paul quietly explained.

"I think that D and Beth are a big part of that too. They're both strong people who love each other, so you've got a good example to follow." Nazzy interjected.

"That's true." Paul said easily.

"Plus, they support you." Vinda added. "You don't have to sneak around or defy them to be together. That's got to help."

"Yeah. I don't know if they're exactly *happy* with the way things have turned out. If it were up to them, they probably would have chosen for things to end up differently. But, so far, they've stood back and allowed us to make our own decisions." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Wow. I can't even imagine my parents acting that way." Karras said frankly.

"How do you think your parents would act if you brought someone like Paul home and introduced him as your boyfriend?" Nazzy asked as he led the way into the wizardry classroom.

"I think the first thing they'd do is go ballistic about how it's my responsibility to carry on the Karras family name." Karras said frankly.

"So Karras is your last name?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. My first name is Alexander."

"I think that name is even more common than Paul. I can see why you'd choose to go with your last name." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. Anyway, after they tell me about how it's my duty to give them legitimate grandkids with the Karras family name, they'd start picking apart whoever I brought home, because no one is good enough to join *their* family."

"Ouch! What a thing to look forward to." Nazzy winced.

"I don't think I'll have to worry. I've got a plan." Karras said with a mischievous grin.

At the expectant looks focused on him, he explained, "Unless I meet someone *really* special, I don't plan on getting into a relationship. I mean, I'm not going to date for the sake of dating or try to hook up with anyone."

"That sounds kind of lonely." Vinda said honestly.

"I'm okay being alone." Karras said frankly, then added, "But if it *does* start getting to me, I can always hang out with my friends online or even in person. I don't *need* to have someone around me twenty-four seven to keep me entertained."

"I do." Nazzy said simply, then added, "But that's just me."

"Yeah. You go with what works." Vinda said with a loving smile at him.

"So, that's your plan?" Paul asked Karras uncertainly.

"Well, my plan also includes my parents getting nervous as I get older and don't show any interest in making an heir for the *Karras Family Dynasty*."

"I'm guessing that you're an only child." Nazzy said slowly.

"Yeah. They did their duty and from the look of it once I was conceived they were relieved to know that they never had to do it again." Karras said frankly, then added with a grin, "They should have known better. Even the royals have an heir and a spare."

"*Are* you some kind of royalty? I mean, why is it such a big deal to them?" Vinda asked curiously.

"You'd think so from the way that they act, but as far as I know, we're just another family of witches, making our way in the modern world. I've never heard of any of our ancestors doing anything important... or even interesting."

"Some people are all insane crazy about carrying on the family name. My parents are like that." Vinda said seriously. "Thankfully, my brothers have already taken care of it."

"My parents couldn't care less if I ever have kids or not." Nazzy said honestly.

"As long as you don't leave a grandbaby on their doorstep and skip town." Vinda added with a grin.

"Well, yeah. They might have mentioned that possibility once or twice when Vinda and I first started dating." Nazzy said shyly.

"Don't forget, G was with us then. The looks on their faces when we told them that the three of us were a couple was priceless." Vinda laughed.

"I can't even imagine that. How did it go?" Paul asked curiously.

"It was surreal. G was a nervous wreck, afraid of saying or doing something wrong. My parents were blindsided and didn't know how to react." Nazzy said as he fought to keep from laughing.

"I think all the parents were thinking the same thing, thinking that we were having all kinds of crazy three-way sex, but D was the only one who had the balls to ask us about it." Vinda said honestly.

"What did you tell him?" Paul asked curiously.

"The truth. We're three best friends who love each other. As far as the sex thing, we never really did that much." Vinda said frankly, then looked to Nazzy to continue.

"We tried a few things with each other, I mean, me and Vinda or me and G."

"Or *me* and G." Vinda interjected.

"Yeah." Nazzy agreed, then continued, "But I don't think the three of us together ever did more than kiss and hug. That was enough to drive the parents crazy, but it was a lot more innocent than it sounds."

"We definitely didn't do anything that would result in grandbabies on Nazzy's parent's doorstep." Vinda added with a laugh.

"But how did D react when you told him?" Paul asked curiously.

"He was totally cool about it. In fact, I think that he was impressed that G had found a practical way to have a girlfriend and a boyfriend and to safely explore his sexuality. I guess a lot of kids go through that kind of stuff later on and some still haven't figured it out when they get into college."

"G's dad sounds awesome." Karras said frankly.

"He is." Paul said immediately.

Nazzy and Vinda both nodded their agreement.

Before anything more could be said, Professor Ortega led a procession of teachers into the classroom.

* * * * *

"I've recently been reminded of the need for experimentation and innovation. Wizardry tends to be thought of as one of the disciplines that is simply the recitation of established spells and mastery of their use.

"Any art that doesn't grow and evolve will eventually wither and die. So, as a focus of today's exercises, I'd like for you to consider how you would modify or further develop your traditional spells.

"No doubt, there are dangers in venturing outside of what is proven to already work. To minimize those dangers, I will ask you to discuss your modifications with your teachers before attempting anything new.

"I believe that there are many rewards to be had if we will only dare to venture outside of our comfort zone where all is safe and familiar. Should any of you develop anything of significance that you would like to share with the rest of the class, be prepared to present it on Friday.

"Remember, most innovative ideas don't spring into existence fully formed. Rather, they develop over time with thought and discussion. Should you have such a seed of an idea, please feel free to seek me out. I may be able to provide some insight. Now I will leave you to your magical pursuits. Good afternoon."

Paul was amazed at just how inspiring Professor Ortega was. He couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was, but after listening to Professor Ortega's speech, he wanted to experience the joy of discovery and do great things.

"I'll see you after class." Paul said as he broke away from their group and started walking toward the study room.

* * * * *

"How is everything going, Amelia?" Paul asked as he walked in.

"Fine." Amelia said cautiously.

"So you've got everything in line for the summoning spell today?" Paul asked curiously.

"I went over it a few times last night. I have a feeling that it's right at my upper limit, but I think I can do it." Amelia said anxiously.

"Can you open a spell diagram for me?" Nicholas asked abruptly.

"Frederick or Xaphan?" Paul asked simply.

"Frederick."

Paul glanced to his side, then Frederick's seven pointed summoning diagram came into being.

"You know, you won't always have Paul here to draw your spell diagrams for you." Mr. Gilbert said as he walked into the room.

"I think I've summoned Frederick enough times to prove that I know how to draw his diagram." Nicholas said somewhat snottily.

"Is this okay?" Paul asked Mr. Gilbert before he had the chance to respond to Nicholas.

Mr. Gilbert took a moment to look over Paul's diagram before saying, "Yes. I see that you've further refined it. Very efficient."

Paul smiled at the words of praise, then asked, "Did you have anything that you needed for me to do?"

"I didn't have anything in mind, but I thought that the suggestion that Professor Ortega made seemed to be tailor made for you." Mr. Gilbert said honestly.

"To take existing spells and change them?" Paul asked cautiously, to be sure that he understood.

"Yes. It wouldn't surprise me to find that you were the inspiration for the assignment to begin with."

"I think I've kind of done all... wait, there *is* one thing that I came up with that I haven't shown you. Even though it's not exactly summoning, it's kind of related." Paul said suddenly.

"What might that be?" Mr. Gilbert asked with interest.

Paul took a few steps away, so as not to crowd Nicholas during his summoning, then he created an eight-pointed spell diagram made of wizard's light. Of course, within the diagram, was another diagram, just as fully detailed as the outer one.

"What you're attempting to do is impossible." Mr. Gilbert said simply.

"What's that?" Paul asked curiously.

"Essentially, to use this diagram you would have to cast two different spells simultaneously and in perfect synchronization. I'm certain that it would take weeks of work for the two of us to be able to successfully perform a spell on this level at all. Even then, it would be more likely than not to fail."

"Uh huh." Paul said, then reached through the gray vortex that had formed in the middle and retrieved his gym bag from his locker.

"That's not possible." Mr. Gilbert said in astonishment.

"Okay." Paul said with a grin as he dispelled the diagram.

"Paul. What you just did is beyond the capability of... probably even Professor Ortega. What *are* you?" Mr. Gilbert asked anxiously.

Paul realized that he had legitimately frightened Mr. Gilbert.

"Here. Let me show you." Paul said as he pointed to the floor and recreated the spell diagram.

"The outer diagram is a summoning, but the inner diagram looks to be more of a reverse summoning, like what you would use to draw yourself to another location." Mr. Gilbert said slowly as he examined the glowing text of the spell.

"Yeah. That's exactly what it is." Paul said simply.

"But... how can you enact both at the same time? Wouldn't one bleed into the other, causing both to become unstable?"

"No. Not if you do them at the same time. You see, I have another diagram set up that's the reverse of this one. I link this summon to that reverse-summon and that reverse-summon back to this one. When they're both stable, they take almost no magic to maintain. I mean, it's not like I'm opening a portal to another plane or anything, so that makes it a whole lot simpler."

"Even so, I don't see how you can perform the spells simultaneously. That shouldn't be possible." Mr. Gilbert said slowly.

"Well, from what my mom told me, it's something that only our family can do. I don't know anything about that because my mom is the only blood relative I know from that side of my family. But according to her, all of us have the ability to be able to do multiple spells at once."

"Are you, by chance, related to Alphonse Hiller?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"Maybe. My last name was Hiller until my mom got married and I had my name changed to Darroch." Paul said honestly, then hopefully asked, "What do you know about Alphonse Hiller?"

"Very little. I've run across a few mentions of him as being capable of performing multiple summonings simultaneously. I've always thought that the accounts were probably exaggerations or possibly even hoaxes."

"Like I said, I really don't know anything about it. My mom doesn't like talking about her family. I guess they disowned her when she got pregnant with me." Paul

said regretfully, once again feeling a twinge of guilt for what his mother had suffered on his behalf.

"If you have the ability to perform multiple spells simultaneously, then that might explain how you're able to do the Wizard's Light and Fire spells so easily when you're summoning." Mr. Gilbert said speculatively.

"Yeah. Maybe. When I want to do a summoning, I kind of put everything in order in my mind where it looks like it's going to work best, then I kind of just let it all loose and it happens. I don't really think too much about what happens when." Paul said honestly.

"That spell that you just did, do you think that you could perform it on a larger scale?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"No. At least, not yet." Paul said with certainty. "Like I said before, once the spells are all set up and stable, they take almost no magic. But the magic that it takes to set them up is just about at my limit. I don't think that I could make a bigger portal unless I found a way to either make the setup spell more efficient or found another source of magical energy to fuel it."

"I suggest that you investigate the possibilities. If you're able to create a traversable portal big enough for you to actually step through, you will have achieved something that wizards have been chasing after for generations."

Paul thought about telling him that he had seen his mother create such a portal the previous night, but in the end decided to just leave it be. Mr. Gilbert appeared to have had enough excitement for one day.

* * * * *

"Paul? Will you look over my diagram and see if everything's alright?" Amelia asked, drawing Paul's attention from his book.

"Sure. Let's see what you've got." Paul said easily.

After a moment to look over the spell diagram, Paul quietly asked, "Did you mean for the terminus to be offset from the locus like that?"

"What do you mean?" Amelia asked cautiously.

Paul knelt down beside the diagram, then pointed as he said, "From what little I know about it, the locus and terminus usually match up so that when they finally come together, the matter can pass through the veil and into our reality. From the way this is written, the locus will fall short of the terminus, and the matter, the thing that you're summoning, will have to traverse the intermediary ethereal void on its own."

"Where do you see that?"

"There's the locus." Paul said as he pointed, then pointed to another patch of text and said, "And that's the terminus. Even though they're written from different perspectives, in reference to their realms of origin, they *should* actually refer to the same point in dimensional space-time."

"I just copied that part from the book." Amelia timidly admitted.

"I mean, there might be a good reason for it. If you're summoning something that might be bringing unwanted extra beings with it, the ethereal void can be a way of stripping them off." Paul said thoughtfully.

"You already did this spell. Do you think it needs to be there?" Amelia asked curiously.

"No. I mean, I didn't really think about it. When I saw that they didn't match up, I just kind of automatically fixed it. It's kind of like when you look at a word with a missing letter and your mind fills in the blank." Paul tried to explain.

"Well, if the gap doesn't need to be there, I'd better fix it." Amelia said slowly.

"Do you want me to give you the correction?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. I'd rather do it myself. But thanks for looking this over for me." Amelia said sincerely.

"Yeah. Just let me know if there's anything else that I can do."

"Count on it."

* * * * *

Paul glanced over at Nicholas and saw that he had already summoned Frederick. The demon imp was looking back at him, but was able to do the right thing and stay at his master's side.

"Mr. Gilbert, would you mind if I summoned my familiars?" Paul asked hopefully.

"I wouldn't mind at all." Mr. Gilbert said as he turned away from the computer and gave Paul his full attention.

"Do you need for me to do the whole..." Paul trailed off as he made a gesture, somehow indicating a spell diagram.

"There's no need to put on a show on my account. The only time I will expect the full presentation is when I'm evaluating your technique for a grade." Mr. Gilbert said seriously.

"Thank you sir." Paul said sincerely, then looked to the floor beside him as Ginh Zah and Mah Zah suddenly appeared.

"You don't even need a spell diagram anymore?" Mr. Gilbert asked with surprise.

"It's there, it's just not visible."

"How is that?"

"You know how the spell exists on a charm but isn't visible to the naked eye? This is like that. I just created the spell diagram using pure magic in the pattern that I needed, for just as long as I needed it." Paul said simply.

"And, since the diagram is made entirely of magic, you wouldn't have need of fire to fuel the spell and maintain the opening."

"Yeah. I mean, if I had planned on keeping it open for any length of time, I'd probably still use the fire. Keeping a portal open on my own like that would be kind of a stupid waste of magic."

"Can you do the same with your traversable portal, I mean, manifest it without a visible spell diagram?"

"No. I don't think so. I really need the visible diagram for that one so that I can align the two diagrams to create the portal. I might be able to do it someday, but not for a while." Paul said thoughtfully.

An insistent 'meow' at Paul's feet drew his attention.

"Yes. Amelia's still going to summon your friend. She just needs a few more minutes to prepare." Paul assured her.

A little bark, followed by a growl drew Paul's attention to Mah Zah.

"G is in another class right now. You'll get to see him tonight. Right now we're focused on Amelia summoning your friend. Is there anything she needs to know before she does the summons?" Paul asked curiously.

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah discussed the question with whimpers and growls between them. In the end they seemed to conclude that Amelia had everything that she would need to perform her summoning.

* * * * *

"Paul. I think I'm ready. Would you mind looking it over one last time?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"Sure." Paul said easily, then asked, "Do you guys want to look at it to make sure that she has everything right?"

Ginh Zah immediately climbed down Paul's chest and leg, using her tiny little claws every bit of the way.

Mah Zah yipped once and remained in place on Paul's right shoulder.

Paul walked to the edge of the chalk circle and looked over every detail that Amelia had included.

As he looked at the individual sections of the spell, then at the spell as a whole, he began to nod his acceptance of what he was seeing.

Gihn Zah walked to Paul's feet and let out a little 'mew' to draw his attention.

Paul squatted down and picked her up, then after standing, he placed her on his left shoulder.

"Mah Zah and Ginh Zah agree that it looks fine." Paul said seriously.

"Mr. Gilbert?" Amelia asked nervously.

"If Mah Zah and Ginh Zah say it will work, who am I to disagree?" Mr. Gilbert asked with a smile.

"Frederick's on board, too." Nicholas said as he approached with Frederick on his shoulder.

Amelia looked at Nicholas dubiously, but finally seemed to put that aside and calmed herself in preparation for her spell.

She closed her eyes and breathed slowly for a moment.

* * * * *

The color of Amelia's skin became more and more yellow as Paul watched.

She slowly opened her eyes and seemed to be in some sort of a trance.

When she raised her arms, there was another set of arms still at her sides.

Likewise, when she raised the second set of arms, a third set was revealed.

In turn, five of the arms pointed to the five candles surrounding the pentagram.

One by one the candles lit by her invocation.

Paul slowly looked over the setting and approved of all that he was seeing. Her preparations were flawless.

It was strange to see the hand gestures of the spell done largely and in an overly dramatized fashion.

Seeing the gestures done in that manner made Paul think of someone teaching others how to perform the hand gestures, standing in front of a class.

It turned out that having six arms actually made it easier for Amelia to weave the different hand signs as she spoke the words of the spell from memory.

Paul watched and evaluated each movement as he listened to her every tone and inflection.

For some reason, watching as someone else performed the spell seemed to be faster than doing it himself, at least, the spoken version.

Soon a gray mist was forming in the center of the pentagram.

Paul could feel little tiny claws and nails digging into both his shoulders as Ginh Zah and Mah Zah watched the mist become thicker.

Much to Paul's surprise, Amelia began to forcefully call out in a language that was foreign to him.

He could tell easily enough that it was one of the more common demon languages and he got the gist of what she was saying, entreating whatever was within the sound of her voice to come through the portal. What surprised him was that when he had performed the same spell, he had done so speaking English.

It seemed strange to him to hear it now spoken in some ancient tongue from a demon realm.

There was a pause in her speech and nothing seemed to be happening.

Amelia then barked a command in the ancient language that nearly made Paul take a step back.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, something that looked like a ball of leaves and rubbish tumbled through the vortex.

Amelia didn't miss a beat. As soon as she saw the little wad of garbage, she called upon it to accede to her will.

There was no reaction for a moment, then the ball of trash started to unfold itself and ended up standing to its full height of about four inches.

Unlike when Paul listened to Ginh Zah and Mah Zah, he didn't have the first clue of what the little trash heap demon said when it spoke.

Apparently Amelia understood it clearly, because she began to carry on a conversation with it in hushed whispers.

"Can you tell what she's saying?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"Not really. But if I were guessing, I'd say that Amelia is laying out the ground rules." Paul said slowly as he tried to catch anything he could of Amelia's conversation.

Ginh Zah meowed quietly and Paul turned his attention to her.

After listening for a moment, Paul turned to Mr. Gilbert and said, "Ginh Zah thinks that Amelia will be a good partner. She says that right now they just need to get to know each other."

"Yes. There is usually a period of adjustment when a new partnership is formed." Mr. Gilbert said thoughtfully.

"Why did you look at me when you said that?" Nicholas asked defensively.

"Demon summoners have something of a reputation as being bullies and tyrants. While it is necessary for a summoner to be in control and take responsibility for his subordinates, this can be achieved without the summoner being seen as a humorless monster." Mr. Gilbert said frankly.

"Nothing I do is ever good enough for you, is it? You want me to summon something, I summon it. You want me to command it, I command it. You want me to do something bigger and harder, I do it. All you ever want is more, more, more! When does it ever end?!" Nicholas demanded.

"Right now, if you like." Mr. Gilbert said simply, then continued, "Nicholas, the only thing keeping you here in this room is you. You're here to learn your craft and hone your skills. If you don't like my method of teaching, you are cordially invited to leave. You are fully within your rights to go to Professor Ortega and request a teacher who will coddle you and not offend your delicate sensibilities. For that matter, you can also choose to go to another school.

"If you choose to stay here, all I ask is that you do your best work and take the criticism that I offer in the spirit that it's intended. If you can't do that much, then it's best if you consider other options."

"Maybe I *should* leave! At least that way there would be a *chance* that I could have a teacher that actually likes me!" Nicholas screamed.

"Good luck with that." Paul muttered, then noticed Mr. Gilbert's incredulous stare directed at Nicholas. Paul had to admit that he was rather impressed at the intensity of it.

"Do you want me to leave?! I'll do it! I'll leave right now!" Nicholas threatened.

"Nicholas, all I want is to help you to become the best person you can be. Me taking it easy on you and telling you what you want to hear isn't going to accomplish that. I will admit that I've done you a disservice by tolerating the level of familiarity and disrespect that I have so far, but if you choose to stay, I promise that I won't allow it in future."

After a long silent moment of Nicholas and Mr. Gilbert staring at each other, Paul quietly asked, "May I say something?"

"What would that be?" Mr. Gilbert asked, not looking away from Nicholas for an instant.

"Nicholas, if my vote counts for anything at all, I want you to stay." Paul said carefully, bracing for the attack he knew was to come.

"I don't care. I don't like you." Nicholas said firmly.

"Good. I don't like you either." Paul said easily, in a voice free of emotion.

"Then why do you want me to stay?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

"Because you're better than me. You're more powerful and you know more of what you're doing. I mean, we just saw that Amelia's a good summoner too, but *you're* my competition." Paul said seriously.

"But you can do all the fancy spell diagrams without even trying. You don't have to work for anything and everybody loves you!" Nicholas said, turning his anger on Paul.

"I know something like five spells. I mean, yeah, I can do them big and flashy and fancy, and some people are impressed by them, but I can't do what you do." Paul said slowly, then broke into a smile as he added, "As far as everybody loving me... not really. There's a certain makeup based hag-beast who would probably like nothing more than to see me suffer a long slow extraordinarily painful death."

"So you don't want me to quit?" Nicholas asked uncertainly.

"No. At least, not before I've had a chance to prove that I'm a better demon summoner than you are." Paul said with a grin.

"I'll always be better than you." Nicholas said firmly.

"I guess there's only one way to prove that." Paul countered.

After a long silent moment, Mr. Gilbert turned and quietly said, "My apologies, Amelia. What you did today was a significant accomplishment. I regret that events transpired that diverted attention from your achievement."

"Are you kidding? This is perfect! I would have paid good money to see Nicholas get told off."

Chapter 8

Amelia was taking the time to get to know more about her demonic companion. Nicholas seemed to be sulking, but was doing so with Frederick, so it might be counted as him communing with his demon.

Paul had decided to take a step back and study more of the basics. Although he instinctively knew much of what he needed to know to perform a summoning, there were a few details that he felt that he should more fully understand.

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah were perched on his shoulders as he read, not only following along with what he was doing, but also staying aware of their surroundings, both potential threats and things that Paul might find to be of interest.

Ginh Zah started a low rumbling purr and Paul looked up from his reading.

"Do you mind if I talk to you for a moment?" Mr. Gilbert asked quietly as he approached.

"No. That's fine. Go ahead." Paul said as he put down his book.

"Earlier, you said that you were able to perform multiple spells at the same time. I wonder, do you know how many you can do at once?"

"I think it depends on the spells. If it's little wizard's lights, I could probably do hundreds. If it's wizard's light diagrams, maybe about a dozen at once. But as far as actual summonings... two, maybe three, and that's only if they're low-level and don't take too much magic to cast."

"So your magical limit keeps your ability in check?"

"Yeah. I guess so. I'm still learning about how things work, so I don't have it all sorted out in my head yet. But if I'm understanding what I learned in Astrology, then when it's a 'natural' spell I have less magic available to me than if it's a 'demonic' spell. Besides that, the magic behaves differently depending on which one I'm using."

"By 'demonic spell' are you referring to spells written in demonic languages or spells from this realm that call upon demonic forces to fuel them?" Mr. Gilbert asked curiously.

"I'm talking about using magic that comes from the demonic realm, the dark magic. If my spell uses that type of magic, I have more access to it. If the spell calls on natural forces only, I can still do it, but I'm way less powerful."

"Can you give me an example?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"I don't know..." Paul began to say but was interrupted by Ginh Zah's purr.

After a moment of listening, Paul smiled and said, "Okay. Yeah."

Paul turned his head as a smooth stone wall erupted from the floor beside him, causing Mr. Gilbert to jump back.

"Here's the spell you gave me to create a fireball." Paul said as the text of the spell appeared in glowing letters on the left side of the wall.

"Yes. I recognize that." Mr. Gilbert confirmed.

"Here's the demonic version of the same spell." Paul said as another field of text appeared, this one being on the right side.

After reading for a moment, Mr. Gilbert quietly said, "They're virtually the same."

"Right. But the demonic version sources dark magic. See there, where it calls on the currents of pain and fear flowing from the bowels of hell?"

"Yes. I see it." Mr. Gilbert said slowly, then quietly added, "It paints quite a picture, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." Paul said with a quick grin, then continued, "I can use both spells, but if I need to do something big with fire, I'd use the demonic one because I can channel more of that type of magic."

Mr. Gilbert made a few quick hand motions as he spoke the words of the demonic spell.

As expected, a fireball appeared in the palm of his right hand.

"See? The magic *feels* different, doesn't it?"

"No. I can't say that I can feel any difference. But I can certainly see what you're saying about the magic to fuel the spells being sourced differently."

"I'm not sure if this is going to cause a problem for me when the astrological forces align against me, but I guess that's another good reason for me to try to develop my natural magic."

"Tell me, where did you learn the demonic version of the fire spell?"

"Ginh Zah just told it to me. Her native realm is a hell dimension, so all her spells are based in demonic power."

"Can she use natural magic as well?"

Paul looked to the kitten on his left shoulder and listened for a moment, then said, "There are a few natural spells that she can use, but she's very weak with them. It's foreign magic to her, so it takes a lot of extra work for her to channel it."

"So it's like what you were saying about your own access to natural magic?"

"A little bit. I think that she has to work a lot harder than I do to use natural magic. For me, it's really not that big of a deal. I notice the difference, but that's about it."

"Thank you for speaking with me. I'll leave you to your study now." Mr. Gilbert said formally.

"Sure thing. All I'm doing right now is trying to get a handle on the basics."

"That sounds like a very good use of your time. I'll leave you to it."

* * * * *

"How can I make Frederick my familiar?" Nicholas asked abruptly, interrupting Paul's reading.

"I don't know." Paul answered honestly.

"You have two familiars, how can you *not* know?"

"Mostly because Ginh Zah and Mah Zah were given to me. I didn't have to say or do anything to convince them to become my familiars or go through any binding ritual. All I can tell you is to do some research and find out what steps you have to take."

Ginh Zah mewed slightly into Paul's ear and Paul nodded in response.

Nicholas waited, but when Paul didn't volunteer it, he finally asked, "What did she say?"

"It doesn't translate directly, but she basically said that she doesn't think that you'll choose to go through with it. Her impression of you is that if it takes work and commitment, that you'll choose to whine about how unfair it is that I have familiars and you don't."

"She said all that?"

"Cat is a very efficient language."

* * * * *

Having been interrupted, Paul decided that it was a good time to check on Amelia.

"How's it going?"

"This is great! Even though it may take a while before we both decide that we want to go through with it, Nomia is at least willing to work with me until we've decided." Amelia said happily.

Mah Zah gave a slight whimper which informed Paul that 'Nomia' wasn't the tiny demon's real name.

"What kind of a demon *is* Nomia?" Paul asked curiously.

"I'd almost call her a 'greenman' except that those are based in nature and she's a demon."

"So, she's more of a '*red* man'?" Paul guessed.

"I suppose so, except that she isn't red."

"Or a man. But besides that, she looks like she's more of a nature sprite, except that she's a demon..."

"I like that. I'll call her a demon sprite until someone comes up with a more accurate description of her." Amelia said happily.

"Yeah. I think that describes her fairly well." Paul agreed.

The little brown and gray conglomeration of dust, dirt and debris made a chattering clicking sound which drew Amelia's attention.

Amelia smiled and said, "She likes it. She says that it makes her feel beautiful."

"Good." Paul said warmly, then turned to Nomia and said, "It's nice to meet you Nomia. My name is Paul."

Nomia chattered and clicked in response, then Amelia said, "She says that it's nice to meet you too, and that she thinks that you're pretty."

Paul laughed, then said, "Thank you, Nomia. I think you're pretty too. You're the cutest demon sprite that I've ever seen."

He didn't tell her that she was the *only* demon sprite that he had ever seen. But there didn't seem to be any need to mention that fact.

"Do you think that I'll be able to summon Nomia when I'm on my own? I mean, it's different when I'm here in class with all of you. I don't have to worry about it as much if something goes wrong." Amelia asked seriously.

"You should be fine as long as you remember to make the correction in the spell terminus in your written version. If you do that, then you should be able to summon her whenever you want to." Paul said frankly.

Mah Zah gave a slight whimper into Paul's ear, catching his attention.

"Oh, that's right." Paul said quickly, "Since Nomia can't transform herself into a natural creature from this realm, she won't be able to visit for as long or as often as Mah Zah and Ginh Zah do. You'll need to be careful about that."

"Yeah. I wouldn't want for her to get sick. I'll be careful." Amelia assured him.

"Okay. Well, I still have some studying to do, so I'll get back to it. If either of you need anything, just let me know." Paul said before walking back to the table where he had been reading.

* * * * *

Once Paul was able to get back to his book, he had a long and productive study session.

Just as he was wrapping up, he heard Nicholas casting his spell to return Frederick to his native realm.

Apparently, that inspired Amelia to do the same.

"Are you guys ready to go back?" Paul asked casually.

Ginh Zah answered for both of them, then began climbing down Paul's body, digging in with her claws every step of the way. Mah Zah followed, quite a bit less painfully.

As soon as they were on the floor, Paul quietly said, "I'll see you later."

A gray misty blur appeared for a moment, then faded, taking Mah Zah and Ginh Zah with it.

* * * * *

"It was nice to meet you, Nomia. I hope that I'll see you again soon." Paul said gently as Amelia continued to recite her spell.

Nomia clicked and chattered for a moment, then disappeared.

Paul looked at Amelia inquiringly.

"She likes you." Amelia said simply.

"I got that." Paul said with a smile, then asked, "So, what do you think of your summoned demon?"

"I always assumed that I'd be summoning a monster. I mean, it's a demon, right? I never even considered that anything else was possible until I saw *your* demons."

"Try to keep in mind that the yaggoral are shape-shifting beings. Don't be fooled into thinking that they're nice or innocent. *I* can trust them because of our bond but you should always be on your guard with them. They would attack you without hesitation if they saw you as a threat to me." Paul said seriously.

"Ever since I found out that I was a summoner, I've been afraid of what would happen if I summoned something too big for me to control. But now I'm seeing that there's a lot bigger danger. I can see how someone could trust and care for a demon... even love them. That's a whole lot scarier to me than just having to vanquish a monster back to its own realm."

"Remember, I'm a Cambion. I think that's proof enough that what you're afraid of is very real."

"So your mom *fell in love* with a demon?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"She's never talked to me about it, so I can only guess at what happened. But no matter how many different scenarios you imagine about how I got made, I think

they all prove that your fears about getting emotionally entangled with summoned creatures is justified."

"You say that like you see your own existence as being a bad thing." Amelia observed.

"Yeah. From the way I see it, there are different points of view and lots of shades of gray but in the end, some things are just wrong. I'm one of them."

"So, you think that you shouldn't exist?"

"I *do* exist. I don't regret that. But what I'm saying is that it seems to me that demons and humans weren't meant to live together. In fact, due to the energies of the different realms, they literally *can't* live together. As long as the people who do summonings act responsibly, everything's fine. But when they let their hearts override their good sense... things like me happen." Paul finished regretfully.

After a long considering moment, Amelia quietly asked, "Is there a hotline or something that I need to call for you?"

Paul laughed at the question, then explained, "No. It's nothing like that. It's just that if I had a say in how things went back then, I would have chosen for things to be different."

"I think most of us would." Amelia said frankly, then explained, "Your stuff is different from mine, but I promise, we all got our stuff."

"Yeah. I guess we do."

* * * * *

Since Paul had created Nicholas' summoning diagram, there was no cleanup involved. Once Frederick was returned to his realm of origin, Nicholas left without saying a word to anyone.

Paul offered to help Amelia clear her spell diagram, but she was nearly finished.

After gathering his backpack and gym bag, Paul walked out of the study room where a number of other students were gathered.

"Hey! Paul!" A voice called out and Paul looked around to try and determine who had called to him.

He broke into a smile when he spotted Karras.

"How's it going? Do you have a big project in the works so that you can show off on Friday?" Karras asked as Paul approached.

"I don't know yet." Paul said honestly, then explained, "I guess that I could make some spell diagrams or do a little summoning, but it's nothing that everyone hasn't already seen before."

"What about that stone wall thing you did in gym class? I don't think I've ever seen anyone do that." Karras suggested.

"I could do it, but it doesn't have anything to do with Wizardry." Paul said frankly.

"Really? How did you make that, anyway?" Karras asked curiously.

"Have you ever done the 3D plotting exercises in Numerology?"

"Yeah. Lots of times."

"Good. Well, I just took that spell that did the 3D plots and made the plots solid."

"How?"

"Alchemy is the study of changing the fundamental properties of matter... So I did." Paul finished with a shrug.

"So it was all made up on the spot?"

"Yeah."

"But there wasn't any matter to change, was there? What did you turn to stone?"

"What I changed was the air and I didn't turn it into stone, I just made it solid. It looked like stone because I altered the display properties of the plotting spell to look like that."

"Why? I mean, I get what you're saying about the plotter spell and the alchemy, but why would you make it look like stone... or anything else? Doesn't that just make it more complicated?"

Paul actually had to think about that for a moment before he finally responded, "I've used the spell with the stone wall a few times now, so when I had to pull it up in an emergency, I did the whole thing in one go without thinking about all the little parts that made it up. It actually would have taken longer and been harder for me to pull up a solid blue wall because I'd have to think about what the different display properties were and where I'd have to work them into the spell."

"What'd we miss?" Vinda asked as she approached with Nazzy following close behind.

"Karras and I were just talking about what I can do for Friday's demonstration. He suggested that I make a stone wall, but I really don't think I should because that spell doesn't have anything to do with Wizardry." Paul said honestly.

"I just naturally thought that you would do a summoning." Vinda said frankly.

"I could. I just don't want to do the same thing that a dozen other people have already done since the beginning of the year. It'd be like me being the sixth singer in a row in a talent show to sing 'We Are the Champions'."

"Yeah. I can understand that..." Vinda began to say.

"...and thank you." Nazzy interrupted.

"No problem." Paul responded with a grin.

"But I really think you should come up with *something* for Friday. Even though I don't think it'll change your grade if you don't, it kind of matters what Professor Ortega and the teachers think of you. If they think that you're too shy to get up in front of people, then they'll probably be less likely to recommend you for any special projects or honors." Vinda said seriously.

"Special projects?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. It's a community thing. Different businesses will set aside some little jobs that someone our age with our skill level should be able to do. When the teachers get asked, they'll recommend someone to do the job. We've noticed that people who refuse to participate in class or demonstrate their abilities in front of everyone don't get chosen as often..."

"...or ever." Nazzy corrected.

Vinda reluctantly nodded her confirmation.

"So, do we get paid for doing this stuff or something?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. If you get chosen, it's for an intern position. But it gives you the chance to do real work at a real job and it also lets the employers get to know who you are so you might be able to get a job for the summer or when you get out of school." Vinda explained seriously.

"You really want to get chosen for an internship, don't you?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I really do." Vinda admitted. "Even if I don't get a job right out of high school, having an internship will help me a lot on my college application."

"I'd just like to get a feel for what it's like to work in the real world. I think I'd work a lot harder in school if I had a better idea of what I'd be doing or what kind of skills I'll be needing." Nazzy said frankly.

"I haven't even thought about what I'm doing this weekend." Karras whispered to Paul.

"Oh, good. I thought it was just me." Paul said with a grin.

"But I think they're right about it being a good idea to present something. If you don't take the chance to use your magic and show what you can do, then what are you doing here?"

"Okay. Okay. I'll do something on Friday." Paul finally relented.

"Remember, it doesn't have to be summoning. You have all the different disciplines of Wizardry to choose from... well, except for ghost summoning. If you upstage me I might have to hurt you." Vinda gravely informed him.

"No. After seeing what you went through in Scotland, I can't see me having anything ready before Friday anyway." Paul said seriously, then thought to ask, "Do you have everything that you're going to need for tonight?"

"Yeah. I already told my mom about it and she volunteered to drive us over. You can expect us between four and four-thirty." Vinda said with a smile.

Karras looked from Vinda to Paul curiously.

"We're going to work on a Spelling project together. Would you like to come over? It'd be nice if we had someone who could stand back and tell us how it looks." Paul asked hopefully.

"Are you sure that your parents won't mind?" Karras asked uncertainly.

"They're already expecting Nazzy and Vinda, so I can't see them having any problem with it." Paul said frankly.

"Where do you live? We can swing by and pick you up, if that's okay." Vinda offered with a smile.

"Let me call my mom first. Even though I'm sure that she won't care, she'll get all bent out of shape if I don't call and ask permission first." Karras said as he took his cellphone out of his pocket.

The others waited as Karras turned his phone on.

Once it was ready, he pressed a speed dial number and waited for it to connect.

"Mom? I was invited over to a friend's house after school..."

"No. It's not Charles. This is a new guy who just started in my class. His name is Paul."

"Paul *Darroch*."

"Yes. That's right. He's D's new son."

"No. I've got a ride lined up. I just wanted to be sure that it'd be okay with you before I accepted his invitation."

"The bell's about to ring, I'll tell you about it when I get home."

"Okay. I will. I've got to go..." Karras said as the bell rang.

"Bye." Karras said, then hung up the phone.

"So, it's okay?" Paul asked to be sure.

"Yeah. No problem." Karras confirmed.

"We'd better get going before G comes looking for us." Nazzy said with a grin.

Paul smiled at the thought, having no doubt that G would actually do it.

* * * * *

As they walked away from the classroom, Karras told Vinda how to get to his house.

Paul was quiet as he looked down the length of the hallway until he finally spotted G approaching.

"How was your class?" G asked warmly.

"Pretty good. I don't think I volunteered for anything..." Paul trailed off as he replayed the day in his mind.

"Except for something to present on Friday." Vinda quickly added.

"Well, yeah. Except for that." Paul muttered.

G laughed, then swooped in to give Paul a quick kiss.

"Are you ready with your part for our Spelling project?" Vinda asked curiously.

G put an arm around Paul as they walked and said, "Yeah. I think you're really going to like what I came up with."

"I invited Karras to come over to help us. That's okay isn't it?" Paul asked G cautiously.

"Sure. Except that he isn't in our class, so he can't really help out with our spell."

"I thought that if we could show him the whole thing, that he could give us feedback and help us to make it even better." Paul said honestly.

"That's a great idea!" G said happily.

"So, you don't think the parents will mind that I invited someone over?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"No. I'm sure that they'll think it's great, but I should call ahead so that they'll know how many we're having for dinner." G said as he took out his phone.

Since the house did all the cooking, Paul wasn't exactly sure how that worked, but trusted that G knew what he was doing.

"Hey Dad. You know Nazzy and Vinda are coming over tonight, right?"

"Yeah. Well, we've got a last minute addition, his name is Karras."

G got a curious look, then turned to Karras and asked, "Are you any relation to Oliver Karras?"

"That's my dad." Karras timidly replied.

"That's his dad." G relayed.

After listening for a moment, G took the phone away from his face and asked, "Will your parents be coming over too?"

"No. Vinda said that she'd pick me up on her way over." Karras said shyly.

G nodded, then said into the phone, "No. Just him."

After another moment of listening, he continued, "You can ask him about that yourself over dinner..."

G took the phone away from his face and quietly asked, "Karras, you'll be having dinner with us, won't you?"

After a long indecisive moment, Karras said, "I guess so."

"Yeah. Talk to him about it over dinner. We've got to catch the vans now." G said seriously.

"Yeah. Love you too. Bye." G said with a smile before turning off his phone.

"Real world." Nazzy warned.

"Thanks." Paul said gratefully, then thought to tell Karras, "We've got a friend named Curtis who sometimes walks with us. He's not a witch, so be careful what you say around him."

"Really? I don't think I've ever gotten to know anyone who wasn't a witch before." Karras said slowly.

"Then it's probably about time." Paul said with a grin.

"I never really thought about it before. I just kind of assumed that we went to school with normal people so that we'd get into the habit of hiding who we are from strangers. But since we've started talking with Curtis, it's got me to thinking that maybe it's also to give us a chance to get to know them as people." G said thoughtfully.

"I've wondered about that. It would have been a whole lot safer and easier if they'd just built two schools and kept us separated." Karras admitted.

"Whatever their plan is, it'd be nice if they let us in on it so we'd know what we're expected to do." Nazzy said frankly.

"I don't think this is a test. It's an opportunity." G said quietly, then raised his hand as he called out, "Hey, Curtis!"

"Hi guys. How are you doing?" Curtis asked as he approached.

"It's been a good day. Curtis, this is Karras, he's in my gym class." Paul said casually.

"Karras? That's an unusual name." Curtis said with a smile that indicated that he meant 'unusual' in the sense of 'cool'.

"My first name is Alexander, but so are about twelve other guys around the school. Karras is easier for everyone."

"I guess I'm lucky. I'm the only Curtis that I know... at school, anyway. I've got a grandpa and a cousin both named Curtis."

"Well, Paul is pretty common, but my middle name is so horrible that I'd never want to be called it." Paul said gravely.

"What is it?" Vinda asked with a grin.

"It doesn't matter. Forget that I mentioned it."

"Yeah. Like that's going to happen." Nazzy chuckled.

"If you don't tell us, I'm just going to have to ask your mom. Since she's my mom now, she'll probably tell me." G said with a grin.

"Yeah. She probably will." Paul said then let out a long sigh of resignation.

"So, what is it?" Curtis asked curiously.

Paul looked him in the eyes for a long moment, then reluctantly said, "Auren."

"Oh..." Vinda said with a bit of a cringe.

"Yeah. I told you it was bad."

"What about you, G? You never told us your middle name." Vinda said with a smile, possibly to distract attention from Paul's discomfort.

"I don't have one." G said simply.

"If you don't tell us I'm going to have to ask your dad." Vinda warned.

"Go ahead. It won't do you any good." G said without concern, then continued, "I guess after sticking me with the name Gwayne they decided that they wouldn't give me a second name, so that I'd be forced to use it."

"I kinda like Gwayne." Curtis said honestly.

"Yeah. When I hear it, I don't think of you, but as a name I think it's cool." Nazzy said frankly.

"Great." G said with a withering look at him.

"Wait. That sounded a lot nicer in my head..." Nazzy said slowly.

"We've got to go. The vans are ready." Vinda said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. See you guys later." Paul said as Nazzy, Vinda and Karras took off to the right.

"Things going okay?" Paul asked Curtis quietly.

"Yeah. Things have been a lot better since I stopped caring about what the future convenience store workers think of me."

"Good. Fill your life with people who build you up and you'll have them to stand with you when you reach the top." Paul said seriously.

"I need to get that one on a poster." Curtis said with a grin.

"Yeah. That *was* one of my better ones." Paul said with a smile, then reluctantly added, "We'll see you tomorrow. Have a good day."

"Yeah. You too, Auren." Curtis said past a laugh.

Paul rolled his eyes, but then smiled as he and G walked toward their van.

* * * * *

Paul and G automatically took their customary seats in the back.

Sandy very conspicuously made a point of not looking at them.

Cathy was in the front seat, silent as usual and Paul began to wonder if he had actually ever heard her speak. She might not be shy or unfriendly. It was entirely possible that she was mute.

"Is that everyone?" Joe asked from the driver's seat.

"I had class with Dex today, so as far as I know, he should be here. Can we wait for him?" Paul asked slowly.

"Officially, it's time for us to go. I have no problem waiting, but if one of you insists, we'll leave."

"I don't mind waiting a few minutes." Paul said honestly.

"I think that if we *really* try, we'll be able to find *some* way to pass the time." G said with a mischievous grin.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry I'm so late. Thank you for waiting for me." Dex said nervously as he hurried to get into the van.

"You can thank your friends here, they're the ones who asked me to wait for you." Joe said frankly.

"Really?" Dex asked in astonishment.

Paul was certain that if Dex hadn't been surprised, he wouldn't have said anything at all.

"I can understand if you don't like us for some reason, but nothing says that we can't at least be decent to each other. We don't have any reason to want you to be stranded here or in trouble with anyone, so of course we asked the driver to wait for you." Paul said seriously.

"It's not that I don't like you..." Dex trailed off uncomfortably.

The van pulling away from the curb interrupted their quiet discussion.

"So, what is it?" Paul finally asked.

"I can't talk about it." Dex whispered.

"Okay." Paul said simply.

Once again, Dex looked at him with surprise.

"Trust me when I tell you that I know what it's like to have something that you can't talk about." Paul said seriously.

Dex looked at him warily, but remained silent.

"How about this? You don't have to tell me anything... ever. I won't bug you about it and I won't even call you my friend if that bothers you. But when I see you I'll still say 'Hi' and ask how you're doing... you know, like decent people do. How does that sound to you?" Paul asked hopefully.

"It wouldn't bother me if you called me that." Dex muttered uncomfortably.

Paul thought back over what he had said, then smiled when he realized what Dex was actually saying.

"Okay. And if you ever need to talk to someone... you know, I can listen. I mean, you don't have to, but I'm here."

Dex slightly nodded, but wouldn't meet Paul's eyes.

Before Paul could think of what to say next, G reached past him and handed Dex a slip of paper.

"What's this?" Dex asked cautiously.

"That's our home phone number. You can reach Paul or me whenever you need us." G said frankly.

Paul smiled, then said, "Yeah. That'll probably make the whole talking thing work out a lot better."

"Here's our stop." G said as he pointed ahead of them.

"Have a good night, Dex. Be sure to call us if you need anything." Paul said gently.

Dex gave a single, surreptitious nod.

Paul accepted it for what it was, and leaned forward to open the door.

* * * * *

Paul and G walked around the side of the house and up to the outer door to G's room.

"I guess with me borrowing your uniforms and leaving the country, I've never thought to ask before, but where do we do our laundry?"

"The laundry room is behind the kitchen." G said simply.

"Really?" Paul said with surprise, then explained, "Somehow, I just kinda figured that if the house cooks our food for us, that it'd wash the clothes too."

"Yeah. It does that. If you put your dirty clothes in the hamper in the bathroom, later you'll find them clean and put away where they belong. But if you need them fast, you can always go and wash them for yourself." G said simply as he took off his backpack.

"So I can just drop my gym clothes and towel in the hamper and it'll take care of itself?" Paul asked cautiously.

"It depends. When's your next gym class?"

Paul looked at his schedule to verify before answering, "Next Wednesday."

"Yeah. When you need them again, they'll be where you'd expect to find them." G said with a smile as he began to undress.

"This is a whole lot easier than what I'm used to." Paul said honestly as he followed G's example.

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, we stay busy enough around here to fill every minute of the day. Not having to worry about the chores is nice, but it doesn't make us lazy. It frees up time for us to do the things that we need to do." G said seriously.

"That sounds like something that your dad would say." Paul said speculatively.

'*D's adopting me.*'

'*That makes him my dad as much as G's.*'

'*It could be argued that it makes him **more** my dad, since he chose me, even though he didn't have to.*'

'*Why can't I just call him that?*'

'*I've already said that I love him...*'

'*...and I do.*'

'*Even so, I still can't.*'

'*Not yet.*'

G smiled at the comment, then said, "I guess it is. I've probably heard it from him a thousand times."

Once they were both standing wearing only socks and underwear, G moved forward to give Paul a long slow kiss.

Paul enjoyed it, but finally pulled back enough to say, "We have company coming over."

"Yeah. But I needed that." G whispered.

"So did I." Paul admitted, then shyly asked, "Do we have time to do more?"

"We probably could, but then we'd run the risk of being interrupted." G said honestly.

"Yeah. Let's not do that. I like Nazzy and Vinda, but I'm not ready for them to know me *that* well."

"What about Karras?"

"He's seen it all, so I'm not as worried about him."

"Do you like him?"

"Yeah. But just as a friend. He's nice and everything, but I have *zero* interest in ever doing anything with him."

"If you *did* like him that way, would you tell me?" G asked curiously.

While Paul knew that the question was somewhat dangerous, he got the sense that G wasn't setting him up. He was just honestly curious. After a prolonged silence, Paul quietly answered, "Yeah. I'd tell you."

"I'd tell you, too." G promised, then smiled as he said, "Let's change into our regular clothes, then make sure that everything is cleared out of the way in the parlor. I think that'll be the best place for us to work."

Paul thought about it and agreed that due to the open layout, it was the ideal space.

* * * * *

"Do you have your part of the spell written down?" Paul asked curiously as they walked into the main house.

"No. It's all in my head."

"We're going to need it written down before we finish for the night."

"Yeah. But I'm not going to bother with it until after everyone's seen it and we've decided on what changes need to be made." G said frankly.

"Are you going to be able to start casting your part of the spell before the rest of us are finished?"

"I can start at the same time as the rest of you. It's just that nothing's going to show until the structure is complete."

"I don't know how that works, but if you can cast your spell at the same time as the rest of us, that should work out great."

"We'll just have to wait and see how long it takes for Nazzy and Vinda to do their parts. I think the timing's going to be the trickiest thing."

"Since I do my stuff all at once, I should be able to help coordinate things."

"Things don't always go the way that you expect. Be ready to modify the original plan if we can't make it work." G warned.

"Yeah. If I had more experience, I'd have a better idea of what to expect."

"If you had more experience you probably wouldn't be doing this at all. If you asked anyone who knew what they were doing, they'd tell you that you're crazy for even trying it."

"Then why are all of you willing to go along with it?"

"Because you believe in it... and we believe in you."

"No pressure."

"Worst case, it doesn't work. Even if that happens, I think Mrs. Herdez will be impressed that we tried."

"I was thinking about removing the castle from the construct to simplify it."

"Well, from what I saw of it, the castle is just a couple of stacked boxes, so there's not much to do to make it. But without it, the scene is going to be missing a major element. If you think about it, the scene is of a castle and everything else is just decoration surrounding it."

"I'm just worried that the spell is so long that we might not be able to finish it in time."

"I noticed that you simplified the pillar for Dad when he was trying to do it. If you cut back on that, it doesn't really show that much and it's not that important to the overall project."

"The stone was one of the first things that I did, so I didn't know that I'd have to cut back on detail back then. I suppose it wouldn't hurt anything if I made the pillar solid black or dark gray."

"Don't do anything about it yet. Let's wait until we've tried the full version, then if we need to cut something, we'll know where to start."

Paul was quiet for a long moment, which caused G to finally ask, "Is there something wrong?"

"You're doing this all for me, aren't you?"

"Doing what?"

"The whole project. You and Nazzy and Vinda are all doing this insane project for me."

"We're doing it *for* all of us. We're doing it *because of* you."

Paul thought about that for a moment, then finally reluctantly agreed.

"Do you have any other schoolwork that you need to do tonight? There's a really good chance that we're not going to be able to do anything else once everyone gets here."

"I can't do much more with my 'basic' class until I can talk to Filipe. The only other thing that I'd like to do is come up with something to present for wizardry class on Friday."

"Can't you just summon something? I mean, it's your first week. What do they expect from you?"

"It's not about doing what they expect, it's about me wanting to do something that isn't a waste of everyone's time."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to do the same thing as everyone else when they first started."

"Do you have any idea what kind of thing you want to do?"

"Not yet. I need to do a lot of reading to come up with some ideas."

"If Mah Zah and Ginh Zah can shapeshift, do you think that they might know some other magic?"

"Yeah. In fact, Ginh Zah told me her version of a fire spell in Wizardry class today. She might know some demonic magic that no one in class has ever seen before."

"Then why don't you go ahead and summon her right now and ask her?"

"Hey! That's a good idea!" Paul said happily.

"Will you bring Mah Zah, too? She can keep me company while you and Ginh Zah are plotting."

"Yeah. With any luck, we'll be able to come up with something before everyone gets here." Paul said, then looked at the floor beside him.

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah emerged, side by side, from a blurry gray void.

"Ginh Zah, we have people coming over later but there was something that I wanted to get done first."

The puppy let loose with a lusty little bark, then waited for Paul's decision.

"I think Ginh Zah and I can handle it, but I was hoping that you could keep G company while we're doing that."

The puppy joyfully yelped and scampered to G's foot, then proceeded to paw at his leg.

"Come on up here, Mah Zah." G said as he picked the puppy up and held her to his chest.

Paul smiled at the action, then looked to Ginh Zah and said, "I have to give a presentation in my Wizardry class at school on Friday and I was hoping that you might know of a spell that's easy enough for me to be able to cast but something that everyone hasn't seen already."

Ginh Zah was still and silent for a moment, then she started trying to climb Paul's leg with her little claws.

"Let me help you with that." Paul chuckled affectionately as he plucked her from his leg and perched her on his shoulder.

Ginh Zah began to alternately mew and growl as she explained what she was thinking.

* * * * *

G looked on curiously as Paul created a spell diagram on the floor.

He had never studied anything to do with Wizardry or summoning, so he didn't have any idea of what Paul and Ginh Zah were trying to do.

A second spell diagram appeared next to the first as Paul set the kitten down so that she could inspect it up close and personal.

G petted Mah Zah while working through the details of the illusion he was going to be performing.

Paul conjured a third spell diagram just as a knock sounded from the front door.

"We'll work on this some more later." Paul said to Ginh Zah, then the spell diagrams vanished.

* * * * *

Paul and G walked together to answer the door, but Beth arrived just ahead of them.

"Hello! Nazzy and Vinda, it's good to see you again. Who is this you've brought with you?" Beth asked delightedly.

"Beth, this is Karras." Vinda said properly, then turned to Karras and continued, "Karras, this is Paul's mom, Beth."

"It's nice to meet you, Ma'am." Karras said timidly.

"Please come in. I hope all of you brought your appetites. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes." Beth said warmly.

"You never have to worry about that with Nazzy." Vinda chuckled.

"I'm not worried. I've never left here hungry." Nazzy said confidently.

"Why don't I take everyone to the parlor so they can put down their stuff?" G volunteered.

"That sounds like a good idea. I'll come and get you when dinner's ready." Beth said pleasantly.

"Come on guys. It's this way." G said as he started off in a different direction.

* * * * *

"This place is *huge*!" Karras said as they walked.

"Yeah. I live here and I still haven't seen all of it." Paul said honestly.

"I can believe that." Nazzy said simply.

"I'd say that we should go and explore it now, but we've got too much work to do with the spell." Vinda said anxiously.

"Are you ready with your part?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. We're both ready, but I don't see how it's going to work with four of us casting at once. It's nearly impossible for me and Nazzy to synchronize with each other."

"Paul knows this spell inside out, so you won't have to worry about him missing his mark. And my stuff doesn't interact with yours. When your spells come together and become solid, mine will just slide down over everything." G said confidently.

"Like a condom." Nazzy said with a smile.

G looked at him uncertainly, then slowly said, "Yeah... Just like that."

"Nazzy and I have been through it a few times, so I think we've got the timing just about right."

"Can anyone think of anything we'll need before we get started?" G asked curiously.

"I thought it might be easier on all of us if we had the spells written out for us so that all of us can see them. That way, if we need to make any changes, everything will be right there for us to look at." Paul cautiously suggested.

"Yeah. We haven't made any changes, so you don't have to worry about that. But it might be nice to have the words where we can see them." Vinda said honestly.

"How's this?" Paul asked as four stone walls suddenly emerged from the floor.

"Spooky." Nazzy said frankly.

Paul rolled his eyes, then looked to each of the stone walls in turn as they filled with writing.

When he got to the last one, he looked to G and said, "You'll have to do this one, I don't know your spell."

"I'd rather not write it down in case I have to make changes." G said honestly.

"This has almost the same spell as the Numerology workbook. If you want to make a change later, you can just touch it and it'll change." Paul said simply.

"Okay." G said reluctantly, then asked, "Do I need a pencil?"

"No. Just touch it. I have it all set up." Paul assured him.

G stepped forward and touched the smooth stone-like surface.

The face of the stone wall immediately began to fill with lightly glowing writing.

After only a few lines of the spell, Paul admitted, if only to himself, that he was well and truly lost.

It wasn't just the complexity of the spell, but also the spell itself that was far beyond Paul's ability to understand.

Whereas spells involving Wizardry almost seemed to be written in a native tongue that Paul had learned as a child and halfway forgotten, this drastically different form of magic was completely foreign to him.

In Paul's eyes, the words combined to form nothing less than incomprehensible gibberish.

"Do you think that you can do all that in the time that we'll have?" Nazzy asked slowly.

"I guess that there's only one way to find out." G said as he stepped back to look over his handiwork.

"Come on into dinner." Beth said from the doorway.

"We'll be right there." Paul immediately responded.

Beth smiled at his response, then hurried away.

"Mah Zah, Ginh Zah, it's time for us to eat. You need to go back." Paul said seriously.

"I'm sure that Dad wouldn't mind if we gave them a few table scraps." G said as he scratched Mah Zah behind the ear.

"They can't eat or drink anything from this world while they're here. It will make them sick." Paul said seriously.

"Oh. I didn't know that." G said as he placed the puppy on the floor.

"I think it would be mean to eat in front of them when they can't have any." Paul said honestly as he took the kitten from his shoulder, then he quickly added, "I can summon them again as soon as we're done."

"Okay." G said with a look of concern at the puppy.

Paul placed the kitten beside the puppy and within a few seconds, they were both gone.

"Is all this going to go away when you leave the room?" Vinda asked curiously as she looked around at the stone walls.

"I don't think so." Paul said simply, then explained, "It should maintain itself as long as I don't get knocked unconscious or die."

* * * * *

"So you'll be lending your magic to maintain the spell while we're eating?" Karras asked curiously as they walked as a group out of the parlor.

"Yeah. But it's no big deal. These spells are so simple that I could probably have a dozen of them up and running and not even notice it." Paul answered.

"I don't know how you do it." Karras said honestly, then explained, "Anything that I conjure or summon disappears the minute that I stop concentrating on it."

"Really?" Paul asked with surprise, then after a moment to consider, he finally said, "I guess it's something like that for me too. Except that a little part of me can keep concentrating on one thing while I'm working on another."

"Okay. I know that this is probably none of my business and at first I wasn't going to say anything, but I'd really like to know. Did you just banish your dog and your cat to a demon realm?" Karras asked cautiously.

Paul laughed good naturedly at the question, then answered, "They're actually demons. I asked them to shapeshift into creatures native to this realm. Don't worry about them. I'll summon them again later."

"This way. It's over here." G said when Paul started down the hallway to the left.

"Are you sure?" Paul asked as he changed direction.

"Yeah. Pretty sure." G said with an affectionate grin.

* * * * *

"Karras, you already met Beth. This is my dad, D." G said as they walked into the dining room.

"It's nice to meet you, sir." Karras said a bit nervously.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I've done some business with your father over the years. Oliver's a good man." D said pleasantly as he stood.

Karras reached across the table and shook the offered hand as he mumbled, "Thank you sir."

"Please call me D. Everyone does."

"Yes sir." Karras nervously responded.

D smiled at Karras as he retook his seat.

"Go ahead and help yourselves. Dinner is served." Beth said as she reached forward and took a domed cover off one of the serving dishes.

"I *love* lamb chops!" Nazzy exclaimed when the main course was revealed.

Rather than respond, Vinda uncovered the serving dish nearest her.

"I knew it!" Vinda said happily, then said to Beth, "For some reason I had a feeling that you'd be serving Rajma. I've been so hungry for this."

Karras was reluctant to serve himself, but being surrounded by Paul and G, he soon came to the realization that he had better get in there and get something on his plate or he could very well end up starving.

"Are these mashed potatoes?" Karras asked cautiously, thrown off a little by the hints of red and green throughout.

"Yeah. Red potato garlic mash. They're the best." G said with a grin.

"The mint jelly's over here if anyone needs it." D announced.

"Pass it this way!" Nazzy immediately responded.

"Karras, would you send the brussel sprouts down here?" Beth asked hopefully.

"Sure." Karras quickly replied.

"Did you want some Rajma?" Vinda asked curiously.

It took a moment for Karras to realize that she was talking to him.

"Yeah. I'll give it a try." Karras said simply.

"I think it's best with rice..." Vinda began to say when Nazzy interrupted.

"Have it with the lamb chops. It's one of those 'best of both worlds' things. I promise."

"Um, yeah. I'll try it both ways." Karras said, then noticed that Paul and G were both trying to hand him dishes at the same time.

"Thanks." Karras said as he quickly dished a few spoons of the Rajma onto his plate, then turned to his other side and hurriedly served himself some rice.

"So, how goes the project?" D asked casually before taking a bite of his food.

"We were just getting set up. We'll be doing a run-through right after dinner." G answered.

"Well, with what we saw yesterday, I have no doubt that it's going to be a big hit." Beth said warmly.

"If we can pull it off, it's going to be great." Nazzy agreed.

"Beth and I have been talking about doing something special this weekend. If all of you are available, maybe you can come over and show us how your project turned out." D suggested hopefully.

"Yeah. It shouldn't be any problem for me." Nazzy said simply, then looked at Vinda with question.

"I'll have to talk to my mom about it, but I doubt that she has anything else planned." Vinda said easily.

"Be sure to invite your families. Basically, our whole plan is to have a cookout by the lake; the more the merrier." D said with a smile.

"You know how my mom is about meat... as long as that's not a problem, I'm sure that she'll jump at the chance to get away from the house for a while." Vinda said happily.

"We'll be sure to have some vegetarian options. And just so there's no misunderstanding, the invitation includes any of your brothers and sisters who are

in town too. I wouldn't want for anyone to think that they were overlooked." D said seriously.

"I'll be sure to tell them." Vinda promised.

"Karras, that goes for you too. If any of your family are available, be sure to invite them along. All we'll be doing is sitting by the lake, but for some reason it usually turns out to be a pretty good time." D said as he looked Karras in the eyes.

"But they don't need for me to be here to show you their project. I'm just here to give them feedback." Karras said slowly.

"That's just the entertainment. We'll be doing plenty of other things... do you play an instrument?" D asked curiously.

"I play guitar... a little. But I'm not good enough to get up in front of people." Karras finished shyly.

"No one has to get up in front of anyone. All those who can play an instrument are invited to join in. Everyone else can sing along, if they feel like it." D said simply.

"Paul, did you bring your clarinet?" Beth asked curiously.

"We sold it last year." Paul said simply.

"Oh. That's right." Beth said quietly.

"We'll see about getting you another one before this weekend." D assured him.

"That's okay. I never really got good with it." Paul said uncomfortably.

"You don't have to be good. You just have to have fun." D said simply.

"Is there anyone that either of you would like to invite from school?" Beth asked curiously.

Paul thought for a moment, then shrugged.

"How much trouble would it be if we invited a non magical person?" G asked cautiously.

"We'd have to postpone you showing off your group project, but besides that I can't see it being any trouble at all." D said simply.

"Would you mind? We've made a new friend at school and I think it'd be nice if we invited him and his family over." G said honestly.

"I wouldn't mind at all. Do you have his number? You could call him right now and ask if he's available." D asked simply.

"No. But he'll probably be eating lunch with us tomorrow. We can ask him then." G answered.

"Remember to tell him that the invitation extends to him and his whole family. We'll be leaving from here at noon."

"I'll remember."

"Is that all?" D asked cautiously, then turned to Paul and asked, "Do you have anyone that *you'd* like to invite?"

"Well, I've only had one class with Filipe so far, but he seemed like he was nice. He came here from New Mexico to go to school and he's staying with a host family while he's here." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Go ahead and invite him." D said simply, then asked, "Anyone else?"

"Dex... maybe?" Paul said, then looked at G uncertainly.

"I can pretty much guarantee that he won't accept, but we can ask him." G said simply.

"Is there a problem?" D asked curiously.

"Yeah. But we don't know what it is." G said frankly.

At D's inquisitive look, G felt compelled to explain, "Dex just acts really weird and awkward and shy. I don't know what's behind it, but as far as I know, he's always been that way. I've been riding the school van with him for years but thanks to Paul I've talked more to Dex this week than the whole rest of the time that I've known him."

"Shy, huh? Go ahead and invite him. He'll come or he won't." D said frankly.

"Do we need to warn everyone about Curtis?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Who's Curtis?"

"The non witch."

"Right." D said, then paused for a moment to consider. Finally he slowly said, "Let everyone you invite know about the possibility. However it works out, it's really not that big of a deal. We'll all have fun either way."

"Yeah, okay." G easily agreed.

"Hey Paul, what about your Wizardry teammates? Would you like to invite them?" Nazzy asked suddenly.

"No." Paul answered simply, then added, "I don't think they'd get along well with everyone else... or anyone else, for that matter. Let's just say that the whole 'fun' thing D's going for would be a lot more difficult with them here."

"Good point." Nazzy conceded.

* * * * *

As everyone was finishing their meals, Beth said, "We'll be having dessert in a little while. I'll come and get you when it's time."

"Thanks Mom." Paul said as he walked with the group out of the dining room.

As soon as they were well away, Karras quietly asked, "Why do you want to invite a non magical person to your cookout?"

"He seems like a good guy. It'd probably be fun to have him along." Paul answered simply.

G nodded his agreement, then added, "Besides, he told us that his family moved here over the summer, so it sounds like he probably doesn't have a lot of friends here."

"His parents probably don't either. It might be nice for them too." Paul added.

"I just wondered because... well, I don't think my parents even *know* any non magical people. They sure haven't invited any over to our house."

"Where are you going?" G asked Paul curiously.

"To the parlor."

"It's this way." G said, then turned to the left.

"I need a map." Paul groused as he changed direction and followed.

* * * * *

Everyone immediately took their places, each standing opposite the stone wall that held their spell.

"What do you need for me to do?" Karras asked from just inside the door.

"You might as well sit down. This is going to take a few minutes." G said frankly.

After a long silent moment, Paul quietly asked, "Vinda, do you want to start it?"

"Yeah." Vinda answered, then slowly began to recite the words of her spell.

Nazzy started in next, followed almost immediately by G.

Paul waited a moment longer as he listened.

At some instinctive cue, Paul began to recite the words to his part of the spell.

Karras stood and began to walk around, reading from the stone walls as he tried to make sense of what each of them were doing.

It didn't take long for him to realize that each of them were casting very different spells.

He paid particular attention to Paul as he enacted a strange manifestation of Alchemy on the exact same coordinates that Nazzy and Vinda were trying to affect.

It came to his attention that the spell that G was casting seemed to be wholly unrelated to the others.

The strange spellcasting seemed to be more based in perception than making any tangible changes.

* * * * *

After what seemed to have been a long time, Karras was surprised to see a stone pillar erupt from the floor.

He recognized the stone as being the same as the stone walls surrounding them.

Perched atop the pillar was a scene of beauty; a castle surrounded by a forest and next to a lake.

Although he didn't want to interfere with their spellcasting, he couldn't resist the urge to step closer and get a better view.

One by one, the others fell silent as their parts of the spell were finished.

"Well, I guess this is it." Paul said as he stepped to Karras' side.

"What do you think?" Vinda asked with a smile.

"It's amazing." Karras said in wonder.

"It looks good, but let's see if we can make it even better." Paul said determinedly.

"I don't know what else we could do. With G's illusion, the whole thing looks perfect." Vinda said honestly.

"It needs people." Nazzy said thoughtfully.

"I don't think so." G said slowly.

"Why not?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"Look." G said as he motioned to the construct.

Paul looked at the tiny landscape and before he could think better of it, he said, "It's Lex!"

"Yeah." G confirmed.

"So what's the problem? He could probably use a suit of armor or something to tie him in with the scenery, but besides that, he looks great!" Nazzy said happily.

"Too great." G confirmed.

"I still don't get what's the problem." Nazzy said honestly.

"He becomes the focal point of everything. All the work that all of you did means nothing because he's all that you notice." G carefully explained.

"I see what you mean." Vinda said slowly.

"Yeah. He looks great, but he steals the show." Nazzy finally relented.

"But if we take him away, then we have a scene without a point for being seen." Paul said with difficulty.

"So, what do we do? What can we add that won't hijack the whole landscape?" Vinda asked thoughtfully.

"What about a deer?" Karras suggested cautiously.

"I don't know if I could craft one in time, and even if I did, it'd still run the risk of stealing the show." G said thoughtfully.

There was a long moment of silence until Paul suddenly said, "What about...."

"I'm one step ahead of you." G interrupted as he turned his attention toward the little landscape.

Lex vanished and was replaced by some absolutely tiny animals, looking like little more than specks in the grass.

"What are those?" Karras asked slowly as he strained to see.

"Hedgehogs." G answered simply.

"What are they doing?" Nazzy asked in a whisper.

"Frolicking." G said with a smile.

"Are they going to take a long time to incorporate into your spell?" Vinda asked curiously.

"No. I've already got them crafted. That's the part that takes the most time. Plus, in scaling them down so much I don't need to include as much detail." G said as he walked to 'his' wall and touched it, altering the spell that was displayed.

"That doesn't look too bad." Vinda said thoughtfully as she examined what he had added to the spell.

"Let's take a step back and be sure that we really want to do this before we go any further." G suggested.

Paul literally took a step back and closed his eyes for a moment.

When he looked at the scene again, he was pleased by what he saw.

Although the hedgehogs drew his eye, they were so small that he wasn't inclined to focus on them for too long.

His gaze moved from there to evaluate the rest of the scene.

"Yeah. It works." Nazzy concluded.

"I agree. I wouldn't change a thing." Vinda said happily.

"What do you think Karras?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's like it's alive. It makes me want to smile." Karras said quietly.

"I think we have our final version. The next question is, can we do it again?" Paul asked the group seriously.

"I guess there's only one way to find out." G said unenthusiastically.

"Do you need to do anything else to your 'skin' before we start again?" Vinda asked curiously.

"No. Thanks to Paul, I have every detail written down. Let's do this."

Chapter 9

"How does everyone feel about the pacing? Do we need to speed anything up or slow it down?" G asked cautiously.

"I'm good. I think that if the spell were any longer that I might feel rushed, but this is fine." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. It's perfect for me too." Nazzy added happily.

"I wouldn't change a thing." Paul said simply.

"Does anyone still need the words or do you want to try running through it blind this time?" G asked curiously.

"I know mine." Paul said immediately.

"Of course you do." G said with a grin at him.

"I think we're okay." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"Can I see the notebook? I'd like to get G's spell written down before I get rid of the walls." Paul asked hopefully.

"Sure. Here it is." Vinda said as she handed the spiral bound notebook to him.

"I can do that if it'll be faster." G quietly offered.

Paul looked at the stone wall, then down at the notebook before saying, "Let me try this first. I think I can make it work."

As Nazzy, Vinda, G and Karras watched, Paul began to transfer the written text from the wall to the pages of the notebook.

"You're really getting scary powerful." G said under his breath.

Paul smiled at him, then explained, "All I did was transfer the contents of my spell on the stone wall to my spell in the notebook. If I hadn't cast both the original spells, I wouldn't be able to transfer the information between them."

"Still... If you can do all this, I'm scared to think of what you'll be able to do after your *second* week." G said frankly.

"I think that as the spells get more and more complex that I'll find fewer ways of manipulating them to do new things. Right now I'm just making good use of some very basic, very all-purpose spells." Paul said as he finished transferring G's spell to the notebook.

"Yeah. Whatever you say." G said warily.

"Are we ready?" Paul asked as he looked around.

Everyone seemed to be in agreement.

With a thought, all the stone walls vanished at once.

G withdrew his illusion, then Paul, Nazzy and Vinda withdrew their spells in turn.

"That was almost as impressive as the casting." Karras said quietly.

"What was that?" Paul asked curiously.

"The way you deconstructed it. It was like watching a time-lapse of something dIsintegrating." Karras said thoughtfully.

"Maybe we should make a point of including that in our demonstration." G suggested.

"Since we're going to have to collapse it either way, we might as well make it part of the show." Paul said easily.

"Yeah. Okay." Nazzy agreed.

"Are we ready?" Vinda asked cautiously.

G looked around to see if anyone had any objection, then said, "Yeah. Go ahead Vinda. Start us off."

* * * * *

The second casting of the spells seemed to be a lot more comfortable and controlled than the first.

Each person exhibited confidence in what they were doing as they all kept a steady pace.

Karras watched carefully, being able to appreciate the 'craft' in what they were doing.

The stone pillar emerging from the floor was less of a surprise than it had been before, but it was still abrupt enough to startle him to some degree.

Like before, Karras stepped forward to get a better look at the end result of the spellcasting.

"Even though I've seen the spells and I can understand how all of it works, it's still amazing to me." Karras said honestly.

"I think that's the difference between slapping some paint on a canvas and actually 'painting'. Even though I can't explain exactly why, I feel like what we've done here is *art*." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"I've never been very artistic, but I feel like whatever artistic talent I have has been expressed here." Nazzy said quietly.

"Yeah. We all contributed to realizing this vision and I think it shows." G agreed.

"What do you think, Karras? As an observer, what did you think of the presentation of the spellcasting?" Vinda asked curiously.

"I think that anyone who has ever cast a spell would appreciate what all of you did. Not only did each of you cast your own spells with strength and confidence, but all of you worked together as a group... it was almost like a symphony. All your parts combined to create something wonderful." Karras said quietly.

"Is everyone ready for dessert?" Beth asked from the doorway.

"Yeah. That was perfect timing. We're at a good stopping point." Paul answered for all of them.

Beth carried a tray filled with small glasses of milk and freshly made chocolate chip cookies into the room and placed it on the coffee table.

"Help yourselves." Beth said as she walked over to their project to take a look.

"Thanks Mom." Paul said happily.

"It's even more beautiful than I remember it. This is some incredible work." Beth said quietly as she looked at their achievement.

"Thanks. I think we're getting better at the casting of it. The last run through felt really comfortable." G said as he waited for Nazzy to finish getting his cookies.

"To be honest, I've never participated in a multi-disciplinary spellcasting like this. I think that this is going to be a good experience for all of you." Beth said slowly.

"It's not something that I'd want to do all the time, but I think it's good to know that I *can* do something like this and use my specialty in combination with other people's magic." G said frankly.

"That's a good thing to learn. It opens up a whole new world of possibilities."

"But do you think that it makes it look like you can't do a complicated spell on your own? I don't mean this spell as much as I mean in general. If you do group projects, will people think that you're hiding the things that you can't do?" Paul asked curiously.

"Some might. There are those who are always looking for fault, even where none exists." Beth said frankly.

"You see, the thing is, I've got to give a presentation in Wizardry on Friday and I can't decide if I want to do it all myself or ask one of my classmates to help me, so that we can synchronize our spells." Paul said frankly.

"*Can* you do it by yourself?"

"Yeah. All the spells are little. That's part of why I thought that it might be more impressive to do them as a team. Coordinating them adds an extra level of difficulty."

"If you're asking my opinion, I think you should do it alone. You'll be establishing yourself and declaring your power in front of a room full of wizards. While a group effort might be appreciated for the skill needed to execute it properly, I think that it would probably be best to do that later, after you've established your position in the power hierarchy." Beth said seriously.

"It's a classroom, not a war council." G said slowly.

"Among wizards, there's really no difference. We have an instinctive need to assess the abilities of all those around us and then compete for the best, most dominant position that we can effectively manage."

"Paul isn't like that." G immediately defended.

"Tell me, what are all of you doing here tonight?" Beth asked with a smile.

"Paul didn't dominate or bully us into doing anything, he just had a good idea and we wanted to help him." Vinda explained.

"An effective leader never has to raise his voice." Beth countered simply.

"What about you? You don't do that." G challenged.

"I'm 'The Mom'." Beth said simply.

G seemed to be poised to respond, but then took a moment to think about it.

When he finally found his voice, all he could say was, "Wow."

"Like I said, it's instinctive." Beth told the group, then turned to Paul and said, "But to answer your original question, I think you should go in there and do your best work. They're going to be judging you on your performance, so give them a clear demonstration of your abilities. If you do that, things will end up falling into their proper place."

"Okay. Thanks Mom." Paul said sincerely.

Beth smiled, then asked, "Is anyone going to need a ride home when you're done here?"

"No. My mom said to call when we're ready and she'll pick us up." Vinda said easily.

"Okay. But remember that I'll be in the baby's room if any of you need anything at all." Beth said before slipping out the door.

There was a long moment of silence before Paul hesitantly asked, "The baby's room? Where's that?"

"I have no idea." G admitted.

"So, what now?" Nazzy asked as he went back to the coffee table to get another cookie.

"Well, I like Karras' idea about finishing this project as strongly as we started it. Let's go ahead and bring this thing down with style." G said with a grin.

"Okay. We just go in reverse order, right?" Nazzy asked to be sure.

"I have to go first. The rest of you can work out what happens after that. And if you can think of some way to make it a little more... flashy, it wouldn't hurt." G said thoughtfully.

"When you remove your 'skin', everything goes pixelated. Maybe we could fix it so when Paul removes his alchemy that something visible would happen. Maybe the whole thing could go transparent... you know, like the next step in the deconstruction process. How much work do you think that would take?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"I don't know. That's really more a function of the Wizard's lights than the Alchemy." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. But you could do it, couldn't you? While you're making the air solid, couldn't you also make it darken?"

"I guess so. I'd just have to change, like, three words in my spell."

"If you'll do that, then I can adjust the opacity down a little so my coloring will show on top of your dark background." Nazzy said thoughtfully.

"Maybe. It sounds like it might work. Let's try it and see what happens." Paul suggested.

"G, will you remove the skin?" Nazzy asked seriously.

"Yeah." G said as his illusion dissolved.

"Paul, can you adjust the darkness?" Nazzy asked slowly.

"Yeah. It's done."

"Good. I'm going to make my adjustment and we'll see if it makes any difference at this stage of things." Nazzy said in concentration.

Everyone watched, but nothing seemed to happen.

"Okay. That should work. Paul, go ahead and dispel your alchemy." Nazzy said firmly.

Paul released his spell and the entire pillar suddenly became transparent, almost like the whole thing was made of cubes of jello.

"Wow! That looks awesome!" Karras exclaimed.

"Nice effect. It's better than I imagined." Paul said with a slow considering nod.

"We'll have to remember to make the change to the master document." Nazzy said as he stepped closer to look at the detail.

"Yeah. But you'll have to do it to yours. I don't know exactly what you did." Paul admitted.

"Here's the notebook." Vinda said as she handed it to Nazzy.

"Does this work just like the Numerology workbook?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"Yeah. Except that you don't need to use a pencil. You can just touch it with your finger." Paul explained.

"Okay." Nazzy said as he leafed through the notebook and found the proper place in the spell.

"That's fixed. Now I'll remove my part." Nazzy said as he turned his attention back to the pillar.

Paul took the notebook from him and noticed what changes Nazzy had made. In a matter of seconds his own spell was also updated and he handed the notebook back to Vinda.

Nazzy focused on the pillar and as he did, all the color suddenly washed out of the whole thing, leaving it looking like a clear glass structure made of tiny cubes.

"Instead of making it vanish all at once, I can deconstruct it layer by layer." Vinda slowly suggested.

"Let's give it a try." G said simply.

Vinda nodded, then focused her attention on the clear glass pillar.

The effect was like icicles shattering and evaporating into nothing before their eyes. The scene was mesmerizing and everyone watched silently until every trace of the pillar was finally gone.

"Wow! Do you need to make any adjustments to the master spell to make that happen?" G finally asked.

"No. I just changed the way that I dispelled the plotter spell." Vinda said simply.

"What do you think, Karras? Is that flashy enough?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. That was great... well, except that you might think about coordinating what you do while you're dispelling it... I mean, the spectacle of it is great, but you all standing around staring at it is... it kind of makes it look like you're not connected to what's happening." Karras said with difficulty.

"So, we need to add some theatrics." G summarized.

"Just a little. You don't want to draw attention away from what you're doing. But I think it'd be better if it actually looked like it was *you* who was doing it." Karras tried to explain.

"I do a lot of that with my spell diagrams." Paul said thoughtfully.

"How's that?" G asked curiously.

"Sometimes I make gestures that aren't part of the spell, just to signal that I'm making the change, so people won't think that the diagram is out of control." Paul explained, then held his hands out in front of him.

He made a clockwise arching motion with both hands as the spell diagram formed on the floor.

With a little twitching motion, balls of fire appeared at each of the points.

A gray swirl of mist appeared, then Mah Zah and Ginh Zah tumbled out.

Once the gray mist had cleared, Paul made a sweeping motion and the diagram and balls of flame disappeared.

"I could have done the whole thing without even raising my hands. Everything I just did was for show." Paul said seriously as he reached down and picked up Ginh Zah.

"So what do you think we should do when we dispel the project?" G asked curiously as he picked up Mah Zah and cuddled her to his chest.

"I don't know. Maybe each of us should just make the natural movements that go with what we're doing." Paul said uncertainly as he perched Ginh Zah on his shoulder.

"But do you think that Mrs. Herdez will dock us points if we do that?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"I don't think so. I feel like she'll appreciate that we wanted to put on a good show. Not only does the magic work, but doing it this way makes it look like we really meant for it to work the way that it does." G said thoughtfully as he continued to cuddle the puppy.

"Yeah. Instead of just poofing it away, now it looks like we're almost 'uncasting' the spell." Nazzy said consideringly.

"I like the sound of that." G smiled as he petted Mah Zah gently.

"It looks like we have time, why don't we run through the whole thing again?" Vinda suggested.

"Yeah. Okay. But why don't we go to my room this time? I feel like it'd be good to try conjuring in a different setting. That way we'll be less likely to get thrown off when we're doing it in the classroom." G asked as he looked to see what everyone thought of the idea.

"Yeah. Just give me one minute." Nazzy said as he hurried over to the coffee table and picked up the last few cookies.

G smiled at the action, then said, "Come on."

* * * * *

"You mean you have your own house?" Karras asked as he realized what he was seeing.

"Yeah. When my dad decided that I was old enough that I didn't need someone watching over me every minute of the day, he had my room built." G said simply.

"Maybe my dad will do that if he ever thinks that about me." Karras chuckled derisively.

"He still treats you like a little kid?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's not like he tries to hold my hand when we cross the street or asks me if I need to 'go potty'. But I just get the feeling that he doesn't trust me to do or decide anything on my own." Karras said quietly.

"He probably doesn't." Paul said honestly.

Karras looked at him with surprise.

"I grew up without a dad, so I'm probably the last one who should be guessing at what's going through his mind. But it seems to me that the people who know you get used to seeing you a certain way and even though you get older, they keep that image in their minds. He may not be treating you like a kid because he doesn't trust you, he may be doing it because when he looks at you, he still sees you like you were when you needed him to do everything for you."

"I don't know how I'll ever prove to him that I'm ready to stand on my own."

"I don't know either, but if you come up with anything that we can help with, let us know." Paul finished with a smile.

"Here we are." G said as he opened the door.

* * * * *

"This is *your* room?" Karras asked to confirm as he looked around.

"Yeah. Well, mine and Paul's, at least until Dad can build Paul a room of his own."

"This place is *insane*! I love it!" Karras said with a huge smile.

"Check out my anime collection. I've got a few that are nearly impossible to find." G said as he gestured beside the big screen television.

"Do you want to go ahead and get started?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Paul, will you help me clear the blankets out of the way."

"I got it." Paul immediately responded.

"That should be enough room. Vinda, go ahead and start whenever you're ready."

She looked around to see that the others were paying attention, then started her spellcasting.

Nazzy began casting next, followed closely by G, and Paul jumped in when his time came.

Karras watched the four of them, casting their different spells, and wasn't startled at all when the stone pillar finally emerged from the floor.

"That seems to be getting easier." G said as he looked over their handiwork.

"Yeah. It's like I've got a solid copy of it in my memory now. I could probably recite it in my sleep." Nazzy agreed.

"That might be fun, waking up to wizard lights all over the place." G said with a grin.

"How'd it look from your point of view, Karras?" Paul asked curiously.

"It looked smooth and professional. No one missed a beat." Karras answered confidently.

A small mew from Paul's shoulder drew his attention, he listened for a moment, then announced, "Ginh Zah agrees. She couldn't spot anything that we did that needed improved on."

Mah Zah barked once.

"Mah Zah thinks so too." Paul added.

"Well, now's the part where we don't have to do much of anything. Mrs. Herdez will look it over and maybe ask us a few questions about it. Then the next part will be to take it back down." G said seriously.

"Lead the way." Paul said with a smile.

G slowly raised his hands in the direction of the pillar, then suddenly dropped them. As he did, the illusion fell away from the construct, revealing the colorful pixelated structure before them.

"Nice." Paul said appreciatively, then held one hand out toward the pillar with his palm open toward it. He held it there for a moment, for dramatic effect, then slowly closed his fist as he pulled his hand away.

As he did that, the entire pillar became a colorful arrangement of transparent cubes.

"I don't know what it means, but it works." Karras whispered as he kept his focus on the pillar.

Nazzy made a grand counterclockwise gesture in the air with one hand and all the color drained from the structure.

"I like that." Vinda said warmly, then pointed at the pillar as she said, "Be gone!"

When she said that, all the little glass or ice crystals making up the pillar seemed to shatter in a cascading effect from top to bottom.

"I don't think it's casting the spell that's making my heart race. That was just awesome!" Nazzy said with a big grin.

"That was perfect! Who wants to kick back and watch some anime for a little while to celebrate?" G asked hopefully.

"I don't think Mom wants me out too late on a school night." Vinda said cautiously.

"It's not as late as it feels. We have time to watch a few episodes before we have to start worrying about it."

"That won't cause you any trouble, will it Karras?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"No. It's still early."

"Vinda, I know that you're sometimes offended by my choice of videos, so why don't you pick out what we'll be watching tonight."

"I know just the one that I want to see." Vinda said as she walked to the shelves of movies.

As Paul sat next to G on the couch, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah took their honored positions in the boys' laps.

* * * * *

"Regular people can't *possibly* believe that witches are like that, can they?" Karras asked between bouts of laughter at the silly animated show.

"I can't speak for all regular people, but I never believed that any of it was true. I didn't believe in magic at all." Paul said honestly.

"I can't even imagine growing up that way. What a bleak worldview." Karras said slowly.

Paul thought about that for a moment, then amended, "Okay, maybe I didn't *believe* in magic in my head, but in my heart and soul, I always had this... something... like my inner self *knew* that magic was real. My logical mind would see something and dismiss it, but my emotional inner self would embrace it as being an example of something that was true."

"Like what?" G asked curiously.

"Little things like walking over to the phone before it rings or taking an umbrella to school with me when there's no hint that it's going to rain... just little things like that." Paul said thoughtfully.

"So you have precognitive abilities?" Vinda asked curiously.

"I might on some level, but it's not like I get visions of the future or anything like that. Sometimes I just happen to be in the right place at the right time when, if you think about it later, I have no reason for being there."

"Have you noticed if you've been scheduled for an Augury class?"

"Yeah. I have that tomorrow morning. I meant to ask about that. What is it?"

"It's a class about spotting portents and omens. You'll probably be in the second level class. I took the first level class, the one for the people who don't have 'the gift'." Vinda explained.

"So, what will I be doing in there?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I've talked to some people who've taken Augury 2, they all seemed to like it." G said frankly, then continued, "It sounds to me like everyone who has 'the gift' accesses it differently. So you might be able to see glimpses of the future in tea leaves or tarot cards..."

"...or goat entrails." Nazzy added with a grin.

"If I have to look at goat entrails to see the future, the only future I'll be seeing is me hunched over the toilet, puking my guts up." Paul said frankly.

G laughed, then said, "Just, whatever you do, don't let it get to you. Getting peeks of the future is a nice trick if you can do it, but don't fall into the trap of giving up today because you're looking at tomorrow."

"Does that happen a lot?" Paul asked curiously.

"It happens. I don't know how much." G said frankly, then broke into a grin as he continued, "But with all the amazing things you've done this week, the last thing we need is for you to start knowing everything before it even happens."

"You'll be insufferable." Vinda said with a grin in Paul's direction.

"Knowing when the phone's going to ring and when I need to carry an umbrella is probably good enough for me for right now." Paul said honestly.

"It won't hurt to learn what they have to teach you in Augury class. It might end up being a nice tool to have in your toolbox... as long as *it* ends up being the tool." G finished in a warning tone.

"Do all of you really think that I'm going to go off the deep end with this?" Paul asked as he looked around.

"It could happen." Vinda said easily.

"Remember that the big monster spell we're all working on is something that you came up with all by yourself." Nazzy added.

"You *do* kind of jump in feet first when you explore new things." G told him frankly.

Paul looked to Karras, hoping for a bit of assurance.

"One of the first spells I ever learned was Wizard's lights. I was about four years old. I can't do what you did, making that spell diagram." Karras said frankly.

'*When did I become like this?*'

'*I always did what I had to do and nothing more.*'

'*All of a sudden, I'm all gung ho about everything?*'

'*Oh my God!*'

'*If I become a cheerleader, someone just shoot me!*'

"So what you're saying is that no matter what I do, I'm probably going to become an insufferable prick?" Paul asked weakly.

"Yeah."

"Pretty much."

Vinda and Karras nodded their agreement.

"So, I guess when that happens, all that I can do is count on all of you to knock some sense into me." Paul said weakly.

"No. Violence is never the answer..." G said firmly.

Paul easily nodded his agreement.

"...sex is." G added happily.

Paul looked at him with surprise and more than a little interest.

"I think that if I *really* try that I'll be able to catch your attention. By the time I'm through, you should be in the right frame of mind to listen to reason." G said with a grin.

"What about the rest of us?" Nazzy asked cautiously.

"That's 'Plan B'." G said simply.

Paul audibly gulped his suddenly dry throat.

"You know, I think it's probably a good time for me to call for our ride." Vinda said with a grin as she stood and took out her phone.

"Yeah. I feel really good about the project. I think it's going to be incredible." Nazzy said as he also stood.

"Thanks for inviting me over. The dinner was great and I really enjoyed being included in your project. I'm just a little bummed that I can't be there to see you show it to your teacher." Karras said honestly.

"Well, we'll be presenting it third period on Friday. If you don't have anything too important going on then, you might ask for special permission to attend. If your teacher doesn't have a problem with it, I'm sure that Mrs. Herdez won't mind." G said frankly.

"Yeah. I didn't think of that. I'll see what I can arrange."

"And don't forget about this weekend. You and your whole family are invited. Don't forget to bring your musical instruments."

"There's no way I'll forget that." Karras chuckled.

"Mom said that she's on her way... which probably means that we have time to watch one more episode before she gets here." Vinda said as she put her phone away.

"I'm not complaining, but I just want to know *why* you want to watch a cartoon show with witches wearing pointy hats and riding brooms. What do you get out of it?" Paul asked curiously.

"I get the same thing as anyone else, I guess. Just because I'm a witch doesn't mean that my sense of humor has*magically* disappeared." Vinda finished with a grin.

"I don't know. It just seems... wrong, like it's making fun of our culture or something like that." Paul said uneasily.

"Toughen up, Buttercup. If you can't handle an unflattering Halloween costume, there's no way you're going to be able to deal with demons." Vinda said frankly.

"I'm not offended. I'm just saying that it seems disrespectful to keep spreading a ridiculous stereotype." Paul tried to explain.

"Actually, that stereotype is one of our biggest defenses from being discovered by the outside world. When we say 'witch' we mean one thing, when they say 'witch',

they mean something that's completely different. The misunderstanding works in our favor." Vinda patiently explained.

"Kick it on, Vin. Your mom's on the way." Nazzy urged.

Vinda smiled as she clicked the remote.

* * * * *

As Paul and G were walking back to G's room after seeing everyone off, Paul quietly asked, "Did you want to watch some more videos?"

"No. That series is only fun to watch when Vinda's here." G said simply, then added with a grin, "Besides, I seem to remember you saying something about us showering together tonight."

"Oh yeah. I *did* promise that, didn't I?"

"You don't have to... but if you still want to... I'm interested." G said a bit shyly.

"I want to." Paul assured him.

"Good. Because even though we've done things, I haven't had the chance to really *explore* you."

"Hmm. That sounds like it could take a while."

"It could, if we take the time to do it right."

"Then I guess we'd better get started."

* * * * *

Paul arrived at school the next morning feeling unusually tranquil and settled in his soul.

The ride in the van had been the perfect way to put Paul into a good mood.

'*The calm before the storm.*'

The van arrived at the school a few minutes behind schedule, so Paul said his goodbyes to G, then hurried off to his first class.

The classroom was located in a different wing of the school that Paul hadn't visited before, but he was still able to find it in plenty of time.

"Hello. My name is Paul Darroch. I'm supposed to be starting your class today." Paul said as he stopped at the teacher's desk.

"It's nice to meet you, Paul. I'm Mr. Stokes, I'll be your history teacher."

"Thank you sir." Paul said respectfully, then cautiously asked, "Is there anything special that I'm going to need to do since I'm starting in the middle of the school year?"

After a moment to consider, Mr. Stokes said, "No. I don't think so. Although, as with history, one thing naturally builds on and grows from what came before, I think that you'll be able to get the gist of most things based on their context. If you find yourself at a loss, simply come to me and I'll direct you to the proper resources to clarify whatever you're having difficulty with."

"Yes sir. I'll do that."

"And I suppose that I should warn you about how I choose to conduct my classes. My specialty happens to be in Sorcery, so I use illusions to augment the study of the historical events that we explore."

"That sounds really interesting." Paul said honestly.

"I like to think so." Mr. Stokes agreed, then hesitantly added, "However, some of my students don't react well either to the disorientation caused by my illusions, or to the subject matter."

That caught Paul's interest.

"It is for that reason that sickness bags are located at each desk."

"I should be alright." Paul assured him.

"Take any available desk. Class is about to begin." Mr. Stokes said pleasantly.

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

When the class started, Paul was totally lost.

One minute he was sitting in a classroom, the next he was sitting with his class in the middle of a public street in what appeared to be a peasant village at some point during the middle ages.

The experience was eye opening to say the least.

In the first few uneventful minutes that they were present, Paul determined that the townspeople appeared to be filthy and by all measures, morally reprehensible. The squalor surrounding them was enough to make him want to gag.

Eventually, Paul's attention was drawn by two men having a rather loud discussion in some language that he didn't understand.

As they got louder and more aggressive toward each other, more and more men gathered, picking sides by getting behind one man or the other.

People began spilling out of their hovels and shacks to witness the excitement.

The screaming fight escalated and the crowd of people grew even bigger as the first few punches were being thrown.

Paul wasn't sure what drew his attention, but for whatever reason he turned as a surprisingly tall and muscular man walked toward the escalating fight.

The man bellowed at the top of his lungs in a language that Paul didn't recognize.

The mobs of fighting people didn't seem to take any notice. If anything, the fight intensified.

The man bellowed again, but this time, much to Paul's surprise, pillars of flame erupted all around the town.

Paul was shocked by the sight, but it seemed that the fighters weren't the least bit intimidated by it.

Being mostly ignored by the fighting people and onlookers alike, the large man started chanting at the top of his lungs with his arms outstretched.

The fight continued unabated.

Paul didn't know what the man was saying, but he felt his adrenaline rising at the obvious spellcasting.

He didn't recognize enough about the spell to predict what it was meant to do, but Paul could tell that whatever it was, it was powerful.

Trails of fire began to branch off from the fiery pillars surrounding the town and it took Paul a moment to realize that the spellcaster was invoking an absolutely enormous summoning diagram made entirely of fire.

Before Paul could gather his wits, a series of ghostly forms began to rise up from all around them.

Once the ghosts were above ground, the slender monstrous creatures began attacking the townspeople.

Paul watched in horror as more and more of the ghostly beasts emerged from the summoning diagram all around them.

After subduing the fighting men, the nightmarish beasts proceeded to go into the hovels and shanties and began dragging the women and children from their homes.

There was certainly some wailing going on and Paul even thought that he might have detected some gnashing of teeth.

The huge brutish man who had performed the spell loudly and clearly called out one last magical phrase.

All the ghostly entities immediately began dragging their prey, kicking and screaming into the open vortex in the middle of the massive summoning circle.

In the space of less than a minute, the last of them were gone.

The village faded around them as the classroom came back into being.

"According to official records, sometime in the late 13th century, the town of Glanzenberg was mysteriously abandoned. No traces of the former inhabitants were ever found. Glanzenberg remains uninhabited to this day. Please enjoy your morning." Mr. Stokes said just before the bell rang.

Paul was dazed, amazed, and not quite sure if he were going to need one of those sickness bags or not.

Regardless, the one thing that he was certain of was that History had suddenly skyrocketed to the top of his list of favorite subjects.

* * * * *

As Paul walked into his next classroom, he was greeted by a not too welcome sight.

"So, Paul, I see that you decided to come back. I would have thought that you'd have *daddy* hire a tutor for you by now." Carla said snottily.

"I don't have any dog treats, so you don't have any reason to come sniffing around me." Paul said, then walked to the teacher's desk at the front of the room.

"Mr. Darroch, I assume." The teacher said pleasantly.

"Yes, Ma'am. Are you Mrs. Adkins?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yes. That's right. Do you happen to have a bit of a psychic gift?" Mrs. Adkins asked curiously.

"Maybe a little, but to be honest, I saw your name written on my class schedule." Paul hesitantly admitted.

"Yes. And now that you mention it, I seem to recall seeing yours on my class roster. Tell me, what do you know about my class?" Mrs. Adkins asked curiously.

"I heard that you teach us how to recognize portents and omens." Paul said honestly.

"Yes. Have you attended an Astrology class yet?"

"I had that yesterday."

"Good. I like to think of it this way. Astrology, with its constant flow and movement causes eddies and currents to form in reality. Those with the gift of prognostication can see those striae and make predictions based on them."

"Okay. A lot of that didn't make sense to me, but if you're saying that you can help me get the good things and avoid the bad things that are coming at me, then I want to learn."

"Yes. I think that's an honest assessment of what we're doing here." Mrs. Adkins said pleasantly, then quietly asked, "Do you have any special precognitive gift?"

"Yeah. Maybe. Just every now and then. I sometimes know when the phone's going to ring before it does and other little stuff like that." Paul said uncomfortably.

"Then it sounds to me like you're in the right place. In this class you'll be exposed to a variety of tools, some of which may be useful to you in trying to divine the future."

"Okay. What do I need to do?" Paul asked curiously.

"Since we're already so deep into the school year, why don't I get one of the better students to partner with you and help you get up to speed?"

Paul didn't betray any outward reaction.

'*Not Carla.*'

'*Not Carla.*'

'*Not Carla.*'

'*Not Carla.*'

"Arjun, would you like to work with Paul and help him find his divining method?" Mrs. Adkins asked hopefully as she led Paul to one of the workstations.

"Yes Ma'am. I already gathered a few things, just in case they might be needed." Arjun said timidly.

"I thought you might have." Mrs. Adkins chuckled before walking away.

"Are you new to the school or did you just find out about your precognitive gift?" Arjun asked curiously.

"Both, I guess. I mean, I just found out about magic being real last week. But when Dr. Williams did all the testing and stuff on me, he never mentioned that I might be able to tell the future." Paul rambled.

"You won't tell the future. The most you'll do is make good guesses at it. The future isn't written, so you can't read it. But thanks to the forces at work, you can see patterns, some of which aren't visible to others, and based on those you can make predictions." Arjun carefully explained.

"Wow. Did that come from a book? Because if you just made that up, right off the top of your head, I'm really impressed." Paul said honestly.

Arjun laughed, despite himself, then admitted, "It's from a book that's recommended in our textbook. If you're interested, I'll get you the name."

"So, where's this textbook? Am I going to need to do anything with that right now?"

"No. Not until we've found you a divining method."

"Okay. I don't know what that is."

"It's typically a physical object or objects that you can use to reveal the stress patterns to divine the future."

"Oh? Like goat entrails?" Paul guessed.

"Um... Let's try the tarot cards first." Arjun suggested hopefully.

"Okay. Just tell me what I have to do." Paul easily agreed.

* * * * *

It only took a few minutes with the tarot cards to reveal that they held no meaning for Paul.

He liked the runes, he thought that they were cute and kinda cool, but they didn't yield any better result.

There were some wooden pieces that Arjun called 'bones'. Again, in Paul's eyes, they didn't reveal any of the mysteries of the universe.

While Arjun and Paul were waiting for the tea to finish brewing so that Paul could try and read the tea leaves, Paul quietly asked, "How close are we to having to look at goat entrails?"

"That's still quite a way off. People have been attempting to predict the future since before recorded history. There are as many different divining methods as there are civilizations that have ever existed." Arjun said informatively.

"And that's just here on Earth, in the natural realm. I bet that there are even more methods in the Angelic and Demonic realms." Paul said speculatively.

"Perhaps. We typically do not speak of such things." Arjun informed him.

"Okay. But, I'm just curious, in all the reading and studying that you've done, have you come across any demonic methods for fortune telling?"

"Why would you want to know such a thing?" Arjun asked with concern.

"My demonic magic is stronger than my natural magic. I just thought that if my fortune telling ability is tied to my demonic magic, then it might make sense for me to try to access the ability that way." Paul carefully explained.

"I don't understand. Your *demonic* magic?" Arjun asked carefully.

"Oh, yeah. I guess everyone can't *taste* the magic like I can. Depending on where it comes from, different magic has its own distinct flavor. Because of that, I can tell that I'm stronger with demonic magic than natural magic."

"Can you tell about me and my magic?"

"No. I mean, maybe if I watched you do some spells and saw that you only used one type of magic all the time, I might notice that. But that wouldn't really prove anything..."

"How are we doing over here? Have we had any luck?" Mrs. Adkins asked pleasantly.

"Not so far. We've tried quite a few things, but nothing's worked, not even a little." Paul said honestly.

"Paul was just asking if we have any tools that are typically used by demons to divine the future." Arjun said carefully.

"I have a few things. They're replicas, of course. But not many people like to be reminded of them so I keep them locked away in the cabinet. They're right over here." Mrs. Adkins said as she started to walk toward the back of the room.

Paul and Arjun immediately followed.

It took a moment for Mrs. Adkins to unlock the overhead compartment, but once she finally had it open, she stood aside.

"A skaalix!" Paul said with a smile.

"What was that?" Mrs. Adkins asked curiously.

"It's a game. You just... can I touch it?" Paul thought to ask.

"Yes. Go ahead. Show me how it works." Mrs. Adkins said slowly.

Paul took the small spherical metal object down from the shelf and placed it on the bench before him. The shiny metal surface was covered with ornate engravings as were the surfaces of each of the progressively smaller inner spheres.

"Wait. This isn't right." Paul said slowly as he tried to turn one of the inner spheres through the cutout opening in the outermost sphere.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Adkins asked curiously.

"I don't know. I think it's this metal, it's wrong. These spheres are supposed to turn with the slightest touch." Paul said as he turned the device over and tried to turn another one of the inner spheres through another cutout.

"As I said before, this is a replica. I think it was made as a show piece, not to be used." Mrs. Adkins said quietly.

"Would you mind if I changed it?" Paul asked in concentration, not giving any indication if he had heard her or not.

"How do you mean?" Mrs. Adkins asked slowly.

"This metal, it's too heavy. The pivot points are too soft... And I wouldn't trust the shells of the spheres not to warp after one or two uses." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Are you proposing that there's something that you can do to remedy the situation?" Mrs. Adkins asked curiously.

"Yeah. I *should* be able to change the metal to act the way it's supposed to. I mean, I've never done it before, so I can't be one hundred percent sure, but I know how it's supposed to be and I think that I can fix it to be that way." Paul said frankly.

"If there's something you can do, go ahead." Mrs. Adkins said as she looked on with interest.

"Let's see... I think I'll need to tweek the natural elements for this, so I'll have to use an elemental diagram to start with." Paul said as a Wizard's light spell diagram appeared on the bench.

"*What dwells within the house of earth, let that remain. I call upon the house of fire to temper the metal and bring forth the strength. I call upon the house of air to incite the flame to new heights. I call upon the house of water to restore order and balance once our goals are met.*" Paul said solemnly.

When nothing happened, Paul glanced at Mrs. Adkins and Arjun before reluctantly saying, "I need more power. It'd be better to use natural magic, but since it's fire, I think I can make it work."

Before either could question what he was doing, Paul continued casting his spell, "*Drawing the currents of pain and fear, flowing from the bowels of hell, heed my word and fuel my spell, I command it to be so.*"

Paul brought his hands up in a protective gesture as the skaalix began to glow brightly.

"Is it going to explode?" Arjun asked as he backed away.

"No. I just had to temper the metal so that it would be strong enough to stand up to some use." Paul said, mostly confidently, as he forced himself to lower his hands.

Everyone in the room had stopped whatever they were doing by that point and were all gathered in a semicircle to see what had nearly exploded on Paul's workbench.

"Did it work?" Mrs. Adkins finally cautiously asked.

"It should have." Paul said as he dispelled his Wizard's light diagram and created another one, this one being a triangle inside a circle.

To the onlooker, Paul was standing silently and staring at the mechanism and nothing appeared to be happening.

Finally, Paul dispelled the alchemy diagram and let loose a gust of breath in relief.

The skaalix looked a little worse for wear, not nearly as shiny and new as it had been before.

"I think that's got it. Let me try it out." Paul said as he carefully touched the little device, not certain if it were going to be hot.

Everyone was silent as Paul finally held the device in his left hand, then barely brushed it with his right.

The various spheres, encapsulated within each other began to turn in different directions and at different speeds, each on their own pivot points. All the various spinning spheres were plain to see.

"It's like a clockwork." Mrs. Adkins finally said.

"Yeah. To play it, you just get it going, like it is, then you try to touch as many of the spheres as you can in sequence before it loses its momentum." Paul said, then proceeded to try and play the game.

"Where did you learn this?" Mrs. Adkins asked slowly.

"I don't know. I learned it when I was a kid, I guess." Paul answered distantly, then stopped as he said, "I only got three."

"According to the lore connected to this 'toy', it has also been used as a divination tool. Do you have any idea about that?" Mrs. Adkins asked slowly.

"Let me see..." Paul said as he placed the skaalix down on the bench, then lightly brushed the outer edge of one of the spheres to set it in motion again.

"If you look down into the cutouts of all the different spheres while it's running, it sort of makes all kinds of different shapes in really quick flashes. Let me try something."

With a thought, Paul created a few Wizard's lights to make it easier to see.

"Yeah. If I cleaned this thing up, it'd probably be easier to see everything, but if you look right there, you can probably make it out." Paul said as he stepped away and invited Mrs. Adkins to take his place.

After a moment of staring into the device, Mrs. Adkins quietly said, "I have to admit that I don't know what it is that I'm looking at, but there's no doubt that this could be used to help express the visions of a clairvoyant mind."

"How would you do that?" Paul asked curiously.

"I suppose the easiest way is to look into the device and speak aloud what it is that you see. It will probably end up being more of a stream of consciousness than

anything else. But with some practice, you might be able to direct the formation of images to provide a narrative on a subject of your choosing."

"So I can look into this thing and kind of ask it a question and then wait to see what answers it shows me?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yes. In theory, that's how it should work." Mrs. Adkins confirmed.

"According to what I was able to see in my crystal, Paul's going to end up in hell." Carla said smugly, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

"What have I told you about giving negative prophecies? If you can't provide hope and motivation, then it's your duty to keep it to yourself." Mrs. Adkins scolded.

"It's alright." Paul said easily, then enacted his clothes changing spell as he let his demon form come into being. "Besides that, she may be right about my future. There's a good chance that one of these days I *will* be in hell... probably visiting relatives."

Everyone stared in horror at Paul's demonic visage.

"But while we're at it, let me see what I can see about *your* future, Carla." Paul said as he picked up the skaalix with one clawed hand and started it in motion with the other.

After looking for a moment, Paul set the skaalix aside and said, "Oh, that's too bad."

"You couldn't do it, could you?" Carla said triumphantly.

"I could see into your future just fine. I just couldn't find anything positive to tell you about it." Paul said simply.

"I think we've had more than enough of this." Mrs. Adkins said firmly.

"Yes Ma'am." Paul said as he returned to his human looking appearance.

"What did you see?" Carla demanded.

"Trust me, you don't want to know." Paul said seriously, then turned to Arjun and asked, "Do you still want to help me or have I scared you too much?"

"You won't attack me or try to steal my soul, will you?" Arjun asked cautiously.

"No. I don't do harm to people who help me." Paul said, then spared Carla a glance out of the corner of his eye.

"What are you?" Arjun asked anxiously.

"A cambion." Paul answered simply.

"What's that?"

"A half witch, half demon."

"So, are you evil?"

"Not usually. No more than anyone else, I guess." Paul answered honestly.

"What else can you do?" Arjun asked curiously.

"Well, from what I've heard, demons don't use spellbooks, they just know the spells that they need to know. I guess because of that, I have an instinctive understanding of certain kinds of magic. That doesn't mean that I know it all or that I don't have anything to learn, but I guess that there are things that are easier for me than some other people." Paul said as he picked up the skaalix and motioned for Arjun to walk with him back to their workstation.

"So what you changed into, is that what you really look like?" Arjun asked curiously.

"No. *This* is what I really look like. That's just the form that I change into when I'm doing heavy duty magic... or trying to scare someone." Paul finished with a timid smile.

"It worked." Arjun assured him.

"Sorry about that. If Carla hadn't pulled her evil bitch routine on me, I wouldn't have even thought about changing in front of everyone." Paul said frankly.

"Did you really see something about Carla when you looked into your... toy?" Arjun asked carefully.

"It's called a skaalix and yeah, I did." Paul said uneasily.

"Was it really as bad as you let on, or were you just messing with her?"

"It was bad. If seeing the future means that I'll get to see stuff like that about the people that I know... it's too much. I don't want it."

"Whether you want it or not, you've got it. *We've* got it. Not seeing the bad things means that you don't get to see the good things either. And you won't be able to help people avoid what's coming toward them." Arjun said sagely.

Paul looked into his eyes, then slowly said, "You've had this conversation before."

"Yeah. A few hundred times, with my bathroom mirror." Arjun chuckled wearily.

"It still seems like too much." Paul quietly admitted.

"Tell me what you saw about Carla. Maybe I can help you deal with it."

"I didn't see it as much as I heard or felt it. It was like for just a split second the flashing images put me into a trance. There was this declaration being made and I knew it was about her. It was really loud and firm and sounded like... I don't know,

a judge or a president or something. Anyway, it said, 'You will die with your hands bound. And it will be celebrated as justice'."

"Okay. That's a little darker than any of *my* visions." Arjun said slowly.

"But I shouldn't tell her, right?" Paul asked anxiously.

"Mrs. Adkins will tell you to never tell people bad things. See everything, but only report the positive. I think that that's lying to them, not only are you telling them what they want to hear, but you're also preventing them from receiving a warning that might actually do them some good." Arjun said seriously.

"Even if I told her, she probably wouldn't believe me. She hates me." Paul said honestly.

"That has nothing to do with this." Arjun said dispassionately.

Paul looked at him curiously.

"This is about you deciding what you think is right and wrong. Carla doesn't come into it."

"So, do I lie to people to make Mrs. Adkins happy and to make my life easier or do I tell the truth and sometimes have people upset with me for telling them things that they don't want to hear?" Paul asked speculatively.

"Yeah. When you hear that there's a fortune telling class, you don't think about there being any kind of moral dilemma that comes along with it." Arjun agreed.

As Paul was about to respond, he felt something bump his shoulder and turned in time to see a girl across the room fly off her feet and back about four feet, into a wall.

"Did you do that?" Arjun asked when he noticed the correlation between the two events.

"Maybe. But if I did, it wasn't on purpose." Paul said as he watched several people gather around the girl to see that she was alright.

"What did you do to Katie!?" Carla demanded at the top of her lungs.

"I was over here minding my own business. I don't even know who Katie is." Paul responded.

"You did it! I know you did! What did you do!?" Carla screamed.

Paul looked to Mrs. Adkins to keep order, but she was kneeling on the floor beside Katie, doing her best to assess the girl's condition.

"I protected myself." Paul said as his voice lowered and became more reasonable.

"She never did anything to you! You attacked her for no reason! You're a monster!" Carla screamed.

"As I was saying, I protected myself. When I realized that someone might try to magically attack me, I cast a spell on myself to deflect any attack made against me back to the attacker." Paul said firmly.

"You're just making that up! There's no such spell! And even if there was, you've only been here a week, you couldn't cast a spell like that if you wanted to." Carla sneered.

Paul decided that spelling class wasn't the only time that theatrics should be used. He silently cast his clothing spell and took his demon form before saying in his low dramatic voice, "*From the depths of hell, the darkest night, the deepest fear, from Him without mercy. I call forth the power to vanquish mine enemies. Let the damned be horrified by their fates. Show mercy not, for those who would cause me harm. Thrice-damned retribution, I call upon mine attackers. Allow them to survive to lament their choices. Give them not the peace of death.*"

Everyone stared at Paul in horror.

"Now, does anyone *else* want to fuck with me?" Paul asked into the silence that followed.

Paul noticed that Mrs. Adkins was looking at him, but seemed to be afraid to respond.

He quickly reverted to his resting form and quietly said, "I'm sorry Mrs. Adkins. I promise that I won't use profanity in your classroom again. I just had to let everyone know that if they attack me, there will be consequences."

"Perhaps I can overlook this incident if you can tell me what you did to Katie. I can't wake her up." Mrs. Adkins asked hopefully.

"That really depends on what she was trying to do to me. Whatever spell it was came back to her times three."

Before Paul could explain further, Dr. Williams hurried into the room with Indra following close behind, pushing a gurney.

Paul noticed Arjun looking at him warily and gave a weary smile in his direction.

"I'll understand if you don't want to work with me in class anymore. It looks like I'm kind of a trouble magnet." Paul said quietly.

"You didn't cause this. They attacked you. As far as that protection spell... or curse... I'm really not sure... it seems to do the job. I mean, what was your other

choice? Let them pick on you whenever they feel like it? Screw that!" Arjun said firmly.

"Thanks Arjun. I never want for anyone to get hurt, but sometimes, no matter what you do, life gets messy."

"I think a life that never gets messy is a life that was never lived."

"Oh, that's a good one! I need to write that down. A friend of mine has been talking about making motivational posters." Paul said with a smile.

"Let me know when they're ready. I'll buy one." Arjun laughed.

Their smiles faded as Dr. Williams and Indra guided Katie on the gurney out of the classroom.

After a long moment of silence, Paul turned to Arjun and quietly asked, "I wonder if things will be easier in my*second* week?"

"You can only hope." Arjun responded with a weak smile.

Paul looked up at the clock and noticed that it was nearly time for the next bell.

He picked up the skaalix and started carrying it toward its cabinet when Mrs. Adkins called, "You may take that with you, if you wish. It serves no purpose being a display piece, on display in a locked cabinet. Put it to good use."

"Thank you Ma'am." Paul said sincerely, then felt compelled to add, "I'm sorry about going all demony in class. I'll try not to let it happen again."

"Please, do me a favor and see if you can't come up with some less... 'hellish' answers to your problems. If you'll do that, I'll accept your apology and your assurance that there will not be a repeat of this incident." Mrs. Adkins said firmly.

"Yes Ma'am." Paul agreed, then thought to ask, "Do you think that I'll get called to the office because of this?"

"Perhaps. I'll do my best to explain that you were attacked without warning or provocation and that your magical response was triggered automatically. Someone may still have some questions for you, but then again, they may not. Either way, try not to look at it as being in trouble. If they call on you, it will probably be to aid them in their search for answers."

"I'll try to do that." Paul said anxiously.

Mrs. Adkins looked up as the bell rang.

"Try to have a good day." She said to Paul sympathetically.

"You too. Thank you." Paul said as he hurried to gather his backpack then headed off to his next class.

Chapter 10

Paul was anxious as he hurried down the hallway.

He had the feeling that he might be approached by someone from his Augury class or worse, be summoned to the office.

As he entered the 'Health and Healing' classroom, he was surprised to find only eight desks.

"Paul Darroch?" A young man asked as Paul entered.

"Yes sir." Paul said nervously.

The man smiled at the response, then said, "You don't have to call me sir. I'm just a teacher's assistant. You can call me Mike. I'm here to watch over the class since Dr. Williams was called away on an emergency."

"Oh. Okay." Paul stammered, then cautiously asked, "Should I just take a seat?"

"Dr. Williams asked me to give you a textbook and tell you to study the first two chapters. You may use the study area at the back of the room. I'll stop by and check on you once I've given the rest of the class their assignments." Mike said as he handed Paul a textbook.

"Thanks." Paul said quietly, then went to the back of the room.

* * * * *

Although Paul could clearly hear Mike giving instructions to the rest of the class, he wasn't too distracted by it. The textbook that he had been given was fascinating. The first chapter contained pictures and descriptions of a variety of different beings, some common, some bizarre. The descriptions focused on the general anatomy and physiology as well as warnings about vulnerabilities.

"Mr. Darroch, welcome to my class." Dr. Williams said from right behind Paul, causing him to jump.

"Would you come with me to my office for a moment? I have something that I'd like to discuss with you and I wouldn't want to disturb the rest of the class."

"Yes sir." Paul said as he closed his book and gathered up his backpack.

Dr. Williams led their way out of the classroom.

* * * * *

Paul was silent as they left the 'witch' part of the school.

He did his best to hold on to Mrs Adkins' words of assurance, but they didn't seem to be helping him very much.

After walking into his office, Dr. Williams stood aside and gestured for Paul to continue on into the room.

Paul walked to Dr. Williams' desk, then waited for Dr. Williams to be seated before taking his own seat.

"It seems that you had a bit of unpleasantness in class today."

"Yes sir."

"I understand that Katherine's condition has something to do with a protection spell that you cast." Dr. Williams said slowly.

"Yes sir." Paul reluctantly agreed.

"Paul, can you tell me why you cast that spell? Have you been having some sort of a problem?"

"I'm not going to name any names, but a certain person approached me and tried to 'recruit' me to be a follower of them and their cause. When I refused their *kind* offer, I was told in so many words that I would regret my decision. After that, I decided that I needed to take reasonable precautions to protect myself." Paul said carefully.

"The question as to whether or not your precautions are reasonable has yet to be determined." Dr. Williams said simply.

"It may seem harsh the way it turned out, but I'm new here. Without knowing what they might try to do to attack me all I could really do is try to be as prepared as possible."

"But having such a spell in place could create a hazard all its own."

"It's not like someone *accidentally* bumped into me or their hand slipped and the drink they were holding just*happened* to slosh in my direction. There is *no* gray area here. That girl, Katie or Katherine or whatever her name is, made a choice. She chose to cast a spell and she chose to direct it at me. If I didn't have a protection spell, *something* would have happened to me, everyone would have laughed, no one would admit to knowing who did it, and it would officially mark open season on the new guy."

"I know you have no reason to believe me, but I assure you that we're usually better than this. We try to pay special attention to new students to see that they aren't having any problems acclimating." Dr. Williams said quietly.

"Everyone I've talked to has told me what a great school this is and how I don't have to worry about gangs or bullies here. I guess that my being here seems to have stirred something up. I believe you when you say it's not typical."

"Are you sure that you wouldn't like to officially identify the person who is behind all of this? It may only be a matter of them needing some individual attention or counselling to make things better for you, as well as for them." Dr. Williams suggested.

"Do you know what class was going on when all this happened?"

"It was Augury, wasn't it?"

"That's right. And even though it's my first day in the class, I still got one tiny peek at the future. I won't be naming any names because I've seen how their story ends. I don't know what leads them to that point in their life, but I want no part of it. You don't have to worry. I'm not going to seek revenge. I happen to know that if things are left as they are, justice will take care of itself."

"I don't happen to have a gift for divining future events. But from what I understand of that discipline, with every choice that is made in the here and now, the future changes. If what you saw was some distant event, that future may already not be possible." Dr. Williams carefully explained.

"That really doesn't change anything as far as I'm concerned. To me, it happened, or... it *will* happen. Either way, I've already experienced the emotional impact of it. All I need to know right now is if I'm going to be expelled or suspended for using magic against another student." Paul said seriously.

"That isn't for me to decide. I actually just brought you in here to see if you were having trouble so I could offer to help you. I think that since Mrs. Bright hasn't summoned you to her office that maybe you aren't in as much trouble as you think you are." Dr. Williams finished with a weak smile.

"Thank you for wanting to help." Paul said sincerely, then continued, "And to tell you the truth, up to now everything's been great. I've made some really good friends and for the first time in my life I feel like I'm actually good at something... well, lots of things, really."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"I hope what just happened doesn't change everything. I really like it here. I want to keep liking it."

"If I'm reading the situation right, I would guess that things might be tense with certain people for a day or two, but over time those tensions will ease. If nothing new comes along to stir things up, I imagine that it will all be mostly forgotten by the middle of next week." Dr. Williams said consideringly.

A knock on the door interrupted any further conversation.

"Yes?" Dr. Williams called in response.

Janice poked her head in the door and quietly said, "Excuse me Dr. Williams, but Mike told me that you had taken Paul out of class. Marsha would like to talk to him for a few minutes, if he's available."

"Yes. I think we're finished here." Dr. Williams said calmly.

"Paul? Would you mind coming with me?" Janice asked hopefully.

"Sure." Paul said reluctantly.

"Please try not to worry. Marsha just wants to ask you a few questions about what happened in Augury class earlier, to get your side of the story." Janice tried to assure him.

"Okay." Paul said as he joined her at the door.

"Paul." Dr. Williams said to gain his attention.

"Yes?"

"When you get the chance, be sure to review the first two chapters of your textbook. In future lessons we will be studying the physiology and characteristics of the various beings described there. That overview should be all that you'll need to prepare you for upcoming classes."

"Yes sir. Thank you." Paul said before following Janice out the door.

* * * * *

Janice led Paul to Marsha's office, then left them alone.

"Please sit down. Don't worry. You aren't in any trouble." Marsha assured him.

Paul wasn't sure that he believed her, but did as he was told.

"According to what Mrs. Adkins said, you cast a spell on yourself to protect you from magical attacks, is that right?" Marsha asked seriously.

"Yes Ma'am." Paul said uncomfortably.

"Can you tell me why you felt the need to do that?"

"Because when I wouldn't submit to the demands of one of my classmates, I thought that they might try to use magic against me to get revenge."

"Is that what you believe happened to cause the incident today?"

"I guess so. I've never even met that girl who tried to use magic on me, so the only reason I can think of that she'd try to do something to me would be because she was trying to make me sorry for refusing to join their clique."

"I notice that you're being very careful not to name names."

"Yeah. Me attacking them, even if it's through you, will only come back on me that much worse. If I don't point any fingers, maybe this will all eventually go away."

"You don't have to bother with hiding their identities. I know about Carla and those who choose to follow her. Certain weak willed people like Katie are drawn to Carla's supposed strength and will do whatever they're told in hopes of being elevated in their group hierarchy."

Paul nodded, easily accepting her assessment.

"From what Mrs. Adkins told me, you rather... *flamboyantly* told the class that any further attacks against you would be repelled in an equally brutal fashion." Marsha said slowly.

"If they don't attack me, they don't have anything to worry about." Paul said simply.

"I suppose that's true, but what concerns me is that the spell you're using appears to be quite powerful and should, by all rights, be well beyond your ability. Not only are you new to magic, but even an experienced witch your age would be unlikely to be able to cast a spell of this level."

"What about a *demon* my age?" Paul asked simply.

"Since demons typically aren't born... and don't die... the concept of age has little meaning to them." Marsha said uncomfortably.

"You know what I mean." Paul said with a reluctant smile.

"Yes. I do." Marsha confirmed, then waited expectantly.

"When I realized that there were people who might try to attack me with magic, I got worried that I didn't know how to defend myself. All of a sudden, I just *knew* the protection spell. I've heard that demons don't use spell books, so I've just been figuring that I knew the spell that I needed to know when I needed to know it. The reason the spell is so strong is because I called upon the forces of hell to power it. I can channel that type of magic easier than natural magic, so it's the best way for me to use a powerful spell."

"Exactly *which* hell do you derive power from?" Marsha asked cautiously.

"All of them... well, that's not exactly true. It's something like a collection of all the hell dimensions that are within my reach. It's not like I tap into The Meayithan Realm or Vrezixus and drain their magic for my spells. I just pull a little magic from the dark realm in general."

"You certainly seem to have learned quite a bit about the hell dimension." Marsha said warily.

"It comes with my specialty." Paul said with a shrug.

Marsha smiled despite herself and finally said, "I suppose it does."

"Anyway, I didn't attack anyone. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. If it was up to me, we'd all get along and no one would get hurt... ever. But since reality won't bow down to me and give in to my demands, I guess the next best thing for me to do is let people know that I won't let them beat up on me. Hopefully, that'll be enough to stop them from trying."

"Hopefully." Marsha parroted.

"Is that Katie girl going to be okay?" Paul hesitantly asked.

"I've been assured that she will be."

"Do you have any idea of what she was trying to do to me?"

"The most common name for the spell is 'Push'. It's akin to walking up to someone and bumping into them unexpectedly from behind, throwing them off balance."

"So it's not that different from public school after all." Paul said wearily.

"Perhaps it isn't, but we strive for it to be." Marsha told him honestly.

Paul nodded, then asked, "So what do you want for me to do now? If I remove my protection spell, every witch in the place is going to do their best to take me down."

"I'm not going to ask you to be defenseless. I'm only asking that you do what you can to minimize the violence." Marsha said carefully.

"Do you think that there's something more that I could have done?" Paul asked curiously.

"Considering that it was an unprovoked attack against you, I can't see any fault in your actions or decisions. I'm just saying that as things move forward, try to consider what impact your future actions might have on you and the people around you."

"I'll do my best, but so far I've just been reacting to what's been done to me. I'm not planning on going after 'revenge' or anything like that. But that won't stop anyone else from coming after me if they think I somehow caused all this and hurt their friend."

"I know. I'll keep that in mind as we move forward. Since Carla and her other followers haven't taken any action against you, I can't see that me getting directly involved will serve any purpose. Don't be surprised if in the next few days your teachers make a point of reiterating the school's policies on harassment and bullying, but beyond that, it's just going to be a matter of waiting for what's going to happen next." Marsha said frankly.

"If they can't attack *me*, they might decide to go after my friends." Paul said simply.

"Can I assume that your friends are students who have been attending this school for some time?"

"Mostly, yeah. But I've also got one non witch friend who sits with us at lunch. If they decide to go after him, he'd be completely defenseless." Paul said anxiously.

"If that were to happen, the consequences would be severe, to say the least. While squabbles amongst the magical students are somewhat tolerated, in hopes that the parties involved will resolve the matters and grow from the experience, attacks against non magical people are another matter entirely."

"Is there anything we can do to protect Curtis? I don't want to have to wait for him to be hurt before we do anything to help him."

"Curtis Bryan?"

"I don't know his last name, but he just started here this school year."

"Yes. That's him. A very nice young man, as I recall." Marsha said as she wrote a note to herself, then continued, "I will alert the staff to be on the lookout for any signs of harassment toward him."

"Thank you. He's a really good guy and I wouldn't want for him to get hurt."

"It's good to know that you have non magical friends. People who choose to isolate themselves from the non magical world inevitably end up missing out on the variety which is the spice of life."

"Is that why we have witches and non magical people going to the same school?" Paul asked curiously.

"That's one reason. It's also to allow young witches to become accustomed to sharing space with non magical people. Remaining completely isolated from them can lead to a variety of problems, not the least of which is not knowing how to control oneself in their company."

"I guess it's easier for me since I grew up as a non witch..." Paul was saying as the bell rang.

Paul looked at Marsha curiously, waiting to be told what to do next.

"Go to your next class. Just remember that you can come to me if you're having a problem or would just like to talk to someone."

"Thank you. I will." Paul said before hurrying out of the office.

* * * * *

As Paul rushed into his Basic Magic class, he noticed a few of the other students looking at him warily.

'*I never wanted to be thought of as a badass.*'

'*But regardless of what I wanted, it looks like that's what some people are going to think of me.*'

'*I wonder if other badasses are the same way.*'

'*How many of them are really nice people who've just gotten a reputation?*'

'*I wonder if they're happy being seen as badasses...*'

'...*or just lonely, doing what they have to do to keep the reputation that defines them?*'

"Paul! What the hell happened in Augury?" A boy asked as he rushed to Paul's side.

"I was attacked and my self defense spell deflected it." Paul said warily.

"Yeah. I know that. But what caused it? I can't see Carla attacking someone unless she gets something out of it."

"She wanted me to join her... group. I guess that when I said no, she must have decided to prove to me that I needed her and her minions for protection."

"Yeah. That sounds about right. And with as powerful as you are, I can see why she'd want you on her side... or under her control." The boy said thoughtfully.

"I don't think that she knew anything about my power. I'm pretty sure that it's my adopted dad's money and influence that got her interested. Me being his new son makes me an easy target." Paul said frankly, then cautiously asked, "Have we met? Because if we did, I don't remember your name."

"Oh, sorry. I guess because I knew your name I kinda figured that you'd know mine. I'm Kinney."

"I'm Paul... But you knew that. Um, I hate to be rude, but I've got a project to work on with Filipe and we don't have a lot of time."

"Yeah. I've got stuff to do too. I was just curious about why Carla was after you."

"I guess she takes it personally when she can't bag her intended prey." Paul said as he started walking away.

"Yep. Sounds right." Kinney chuckled as he started to move off in another direction.

* * * * *

"I'm glad you're here! They were talking about you in my last class. They said that you took on Carla and then you got into trouble because of it." Filipe said quickly as Paul approached.

"Yeah. Well, don't believe everything you hear." Paul said wearily, then asked, "Are you ready to work on our spell?"

"Yeah. I brought four batteries. I hope that's enough." Filipe said as he indicated a box on their work table.

Paul stepped closer and was surprised to see four enormous lantern batteries.

"If we can't make it work, it won't be because of the batteries. These are great." Paul assured him.

"What else do we still need?" Filipe asked anxiously.

"You said that you understand thaumaturgy, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Well, I'm learning it. But I know the basics."

"That should be enough. I think that I've figured out how to make everything else work, but I don't know how to convert natural energy into magical energy. If you can manage that part, I think that between us that we'll be able to do the rest."

"I've got the spells, but I haven't used them before. I'm not sure how they'll work."

"Don't worry. It's the same with me. All of this is just my best guess."

"Where do we start?"

Before Paul could answer, Mrs. Cualla called the class to order and asked everyone to take their seats.

* * * * *

Mrs. Cualla spoke for a few minutes about general magical theory, then gave an example with a very simple spell that could be used to remove spots or stains on clothing.

Paul was amazed by the simplicity and elegance of the spell and was certain that he would have many opportunities to make use of it.

Once Mrs. Cualla was done with her lecture, she directed the students to go to their work areas and continue with their ongoing projects.

"Can I see your spell diagram? I didn't get a good look at it before." Paul asked hopefully.

"Yeah. You can have this one. I have about a dozen copies."

"Thanks." Paul said gratefully, then continued, "Let me tell you what I came up with so you can let me know if it's not going to work for some reason."

"Yeah. Okay."

"I think that first, we'll need to change the properties of the charm to make it capable of holding a charge."

"That sounds right, but how will we do that?"

"With Alchemy. I have a spell in mind for it, but we're also going to need a quartz crystal for that part and I don't have one."

"That's no problem. Mrs. Cualla has a ton of quartz in the supply room."

"Good. The next thing will be to charge it. For that we're going to need your Thaumaturgy spell and the batteries that you brought. Do you have everything else that you'll need for that?"

"I'll need the words, the charm, the batteries, the diagram and... either some candles at the key points or a brazier of flame to power it. I have the spell diagram in my book, but I don't have a copy of it. It might take a while to draw it out. It's kinda complicated." Filipe said as he scooted the book to where Paul could see it.

After a moment of looking over the thaumaturgy diagram, Paul slowly said, "Don't worry about it now. I think we can manage it."

"Good. What's next?"

"All that's left will be to cast the prosperity spell. You've already got the words, the diagram and the charm. All we'll have to do is cast the spell and with any luck it'll hold."

"So after all of that, we're just missing the quartz, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll go get it."

* * * * *

"So, have you come across a spell to enchant Filipe's charm?" Mrs. Cualla asked as she approached.

"If there's one spell that can do it, we haven't been able to find it. But we've come up with three spells that might be able to make it happen." Paul said honestly.

"Is this okay? I found one that's a cluster of crystals." Filipe asked hopefully.

"That should be just what we need." Paul assured him.

"Are you ready to try your spells right now?" Mrs. Cualla asked curiously.

"Yeah. I think we have everything." Paul said, then looked at Filipe to see if he might have thought of anything that they might be missing.

"I guess we can try. But I'm not sure where to start." Filipe said honestly.

"We'll start with the Alchemy." Paul announced as a circle of golden light appeared on the table in front of him. Within the circle was the outline of a blue square made up of four smaller squares.

"That's a very efficient and elegant method for drawing a spell diagram." Mrs. Cualla said appreciatively.

"Yeah. It's just Wizard's lights." Paul said simply.

Filipe looked carefully at the diagram for a moment before quietly saying, "All I've learned in Alchemy so far is theory so I don't even know where to begin with this."

"Yeah. Well I don't know a lot about it either, but so far I've been able to make it do what I need it to." Paul said in concentration.

"So, what do we have to do next?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Hold on. Something's not right. I'm not really good with natural magic to begin with and for the spell I'm trying to use, it's not only natural, but it's a pure element. I think I'm going to need some kind of a conduit to be able to channel the power." Paul said with difficulty.

"What element are you attempting to use?" Mrs. Cualla asked curiously.

"Water, for its conductivity." Paul said simply.

"Give me a moment, I may be able to help." Mrs. Cualla said as she walked back to her desk.

She returned a moment later with a stick, or more accurately, a *wand*.

"See if this doesn't give you better access to the power you're seeking to use." Mrs. Cualla said as she presented the wand to Paul.

As he took the wand in his hand, he made a conscious effort to channel the elemental essence of water. He was surprised to find how comfortably the power came to him.

"Thank you Mrs. Cualla. I think this should work." Paul said with a smile.

"One of the things that you will learn in this class is that some basic tools have an inherent nature within them, the nature of the rowan wand is to channel elemental magic." Mrs. Cualla explained.

"Okay. Filipe, go ahead and put the quartz in one quadrant of the diagram and the charm in the diagonal quadrant. The quartz is going to become like earth while the charm becomes like water. When they're in those base elemental states, I should be able to transfer properties from one to the other." Paul explained as he waited for Filipe to put everything into place.

"So rather than using quartz for a charm, you're going to transfer the most desirable properties of quartz into the charm by way of Alchemy?" Mrs. Cualla asked to confirm.

"Yeah. That's okay, isn't it?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yes. I think that's lovely. You've encountered a problem and found a way to overcome it. What more could a teacher ask? Proceed."

"Um, okay. I'm going to have to do this the fast way or we won't have time to do all three spells. So all I'm doing is adding the spells into the diagram for what I need each of the elements to do. Earth and water are going to act as conduits while fire and air are going to act as boundaries." Paul explained as four balls of fire appeared, one at each corner of the square.

"Wait. That's not right." Paul said slowly.

"I can get you some candles if that will be easier. I know right where they are." Filipe quickly offered.

"No. It's not the candles, it's the flame. This spell is based in water, the flame works against it." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Do you need for me to get four glasses of water to put around the diagram?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"Let me try this first." Paul said, then internally melded the natural version of his fire spell with the primary essence of his alchemy spell.

The result was four small fountains of water hovering over the four corners of the diagram, looking almost like flames.

"*That's* an interesting effect." Mrs. Cualla said slowly.

"It's kind of a power suck, so I'm going to need to hurry and get this done." Paul said as he gripped the rowan wand tightly in his hand. "*I call upon the essence of nature, Cernunnos lend power to this my spell. Water into Earth, Earth into Water, two become one. That which Water has alone, now so does Earth. That which Earth possesses, now so does Water. Let it be that when the one becomes two, that both retain the memory of what it was to be more. Let them retain the capacity and the will. So shall it be by my command.*"

As Mrs. Cualla and Filipe watched, the quartz crystal and small plastic charm dissolved and merged into each other for a moment before returning to their former states.

Paul waved the wand over the spell diagram and it vanished, along with his flames of water.

"That took a lot more magic than I was expecting. Thank you Mrs. Cualla, I couldn't have done it without your wand." Paul said gratefully.

"It was a pleasure to see such an inspired use of it." Mrs. Cualla said frankly.

"Okay, we don't have a lot of time. Filipe, you're going to have to do this next part. I don't know anything about your thaumaturgy stuff, but at least I can help you out a little." Paul said as a new spell diagram appeared. This time it was a golden circle surrounding the outline of a red triangle. Every character and detail from Filipe's book was included.

"Go ahead and get your spell together and I'll get the batteries." Paul said as he moved the cluster of quartz crystals out of the way.

"Oh, yeah." Filipe said distractedly, then got another book from his backpack.

After placing the batteries and the charm where they needed to be, Paul hesitantly asked, "Is this right?"

"Yes. But the spell that I'm using is to convert the power from the batteries into magical energy which will be stored in the charm. To do that, we're going to need an outside source of energy to fuel the conversion." Filipe warned him.

"Don't worry. I may not be good with water but I've got fire to spare." Paul said as three larger than average fireballs lit simultaneously at the corners of the triangle.

"Can you add the symbols to the diagram, like you did for yours?" Filipe asked hopefully.

"Yeah. If you can show me what I'm adding." Paul easily agreed.

Filipe scooted the book where he could better see it.

"So all I have to change is the source to be the batteries and the vessel to be the charm, right?"

"Yes. Everything else should be exactly the same."

"Okay. I can do that."

Within a few seconds, areas of text began to fill the spell diagram.

"Is that everything? Are you ready?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yes. Thank you Paul. You've made this a lot easier for me."

"No problem." Paul said with a smile.

Filipe began to slowly and clearly cast the spell. Although Paul had a passing familiarity with the language, he didn't have the same familiarity with the style of magic. He imagined that what he was experiencing might be what it's like for non wizards to watch someone performing wizardry.

When Filipe was done with his spellcasting, he went silent for a moment before cautiously asking, "Do you think it worked?"

"Let's turn it loose and see."

"How do you mean?"

"If what we both did worked, then this thing is like a fully charged magical battery now, right?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"So why not hook a wizard's light into it and see if it'll power it?"

"I have no idea how you'd do that... or if it's even possible."

"I've deconstructed the Wizard's Light spell, so I know it inside and out. Watch this." Paul said, then focused his attention on the charm.

The momentary flash of light that followed not only proved that the charm was indeed storing a charge, but it also managed to temporarily blind everyone in the classroom.

"I think it worked." Paul said as he slowly blinked his eyes, trying to get some measure of his vision to return.

"If I hook the prosperity spell into that, we'll all be buried in money." Filipe said as he, too, tried to clear his vision.

"We'll have to be sure that there's a limit built into the spell, otherwise it will use all the magical energy at once and burn itself out."

"Do you know how to do that?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty good at tweaking basic properties. As long as I can get some sense of what the spell is trying to do, I can probably make an adjustment... that is, when I can see to read again. That was BRIGHT!"

"I'm starting to be able to see again, but I still can't read."

"Yeah. I'm almost there too." Paul said, then thought to ask, "How are you, Mrs. Cualla?"

"Nearly back to normal." She responded, sounding to be cheerful. "You certainly have proven that your spells thus far have worked."

"Yes Ma'am. But that doesn't really count for much unless we can get the spell to stick to the charm." Paul said honestly.

"I'm quite interested to see what you're able to come up with. Whether you succeed or not, I will call this exercise a success for what the two of you have been able to accomplish by combining your efforts. It's really quite inspiring."

"I think I can see enough to cast the spell. Do you want to look this over to see if we have a control already in place?" Filipe asked hopefully as he handed a book to Paul.

After a moment of reading, Paul cautiously asked, "What's this?"

"The binding spell."

"We can't control the power usage through the binding. We have to do it from inside the prosperity spell."

"But there aren't any magic limitations in the prosperity spell. The binding spell has everything to do with the flow of magical powers."

"Exactly. The binding just *connects* the prosperity spell to the magic. Even though there might be a way to regulate it from there, it would be a weak link that would be likely to fail over time. If you build the power limitation into the base prosperity spell, then it's always there, for as long as the spell exists."

"Paul is correct in his reasoning." Mrs. Cualla added simply.

"Okay. Here's the prosperity spell. I don't have a clue where you'll want to add in the limitation, so you'll probably have to do it on your own." Filipe said apologetically as he handed Paul another book.

"This isn't bad. I can make sense of it." Paul said as he read through the magical text.

Filipe waited anxiously for Paul to confirm that he could do it.

A movement out of the corner of his eye caused Filipe to look at where the triangular diagram had been. In its place was a glowing recreation of the charm pentagram. As Paul read, glowing text appeared within one of the segments of the star.

"That's got it." Paul said happily as he looked up from the book.

"You've already put the limitation in?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"Yeah. The way the binding spell is written sounds kind of like your Thaumaturgy thing. I really don't know anything about that, so it'll be better if you do it. If you'll do that, I'll do the prosperity spell. I understand it well enough and I know where the limitation is incorporated."

Filipe glanced at the clock, then quickly said, "Time is running out, so if we're going to do it, it has to be right now."

"Give me your book. I need to transfer the text into the spell diagram."

Filipe did so, then verified that the charm was located in the middle of the pentagram.

Before his eyes, the text of the binding spell filled another of the sections of the diagram.

"I'll start, but you can jump in after I'm done with the first paragraph." Paul said, then before Filipe could respond, five balls of fire appeared as Paul started speaking the text of the prosperity spell.

Filipe was flustered for a moment by the abrupt action, but was prepared to proceed when it was time.

Mrs. Cualla watched and listened as the two boys simultaneously worked to cast their individual spells.

At a certain point during the spellcasting, Paul reached out and touched each of the five points of the pentagram, invoking their functions.

Paul's casting finished first, but Filipe was only a moment behind him.

"Did it work?" Filipe asked cautiously.

"I can think of one way to find out..." Paul began to say, but was interrupted.

"Don't blind me again. I'm going to need to be able to see to find my way to the lunchroom." Filipe said in a slightly begging tone.

Paul smiled, then said, "We can both *see* the spells within actively charmed items. Let's see if we've got one here."

"What? Oh, right. Yeah!" Filipe said as he turned his attention toward the small plastic 'corn on the cob'.

Paul looked at the charm that they had created and his eyes nearly burned at the sight. "Next time, we might want to try a double A battery."

"May I assume that means that you're able to confirm that the item has been enchanted?" Mrs. Cualla asked curiously.

'Yes Ma'am. But I don't think I'd want to touch it. That thing is kind of... scary." Paul said slowly.

"Yeah. I think we used too much power... like, way too much." Filipe confirmed.

"So you believe the charm that you've created is something dangerous?" Mrs. Cualla asked to confirm.

Paul looked to Filipe and they came to silent agreement between them before answering in unison, "Yes Ma'am."

"Then I believe that we should put this away someplace safe." Mrs. Cualla said before walking away.

"Do you think that thing would really hurt us if we touched it?" Filipe asked quietly.

"I think it would consume us." Paul said honestly.

Mrs. Cualla walked back to them with a small ornate chest.

Filipe and Paul watched as Mrs. Cualla spoke a brief incantation and the charm levitated itself into the beautifully crafted box.

As she closed the lid, she quietly said, "You've both done exceptionally well on this exercise. Now, take what you've learned and see if you can't use that to make another charm, one that isn't quite so dangerous."

"Yes Ma'am." Paul and Filipe responded in unison just as the bell rang.

* * * * *

As Paul and Filipe left the classroom, Paul quickly said, "My family is having a cookout this weekend and it'd be great if you could come over."

"You're inviting me to your house?"

"Yeah. My parents wanted to do something this weekend and asked me if I wanted to invite someone from school. If you want to go, we're going to be leaving from our house at noon on Saturday." Paul hurried to explain.

"My host parents are really... um, careful about me. They feel responsible for keeping me safe. They might not want me going over to someone's house who they don't know." Filipe said uncomfortably.

"Oh, yeah. My parents said that you and your whole family are invited. My mom and I just moved here a few weeks ago, I'm at school all day and I get to meet new people all the time but she doesn't get out of the house much, so it would be really great if your family went with us."

"I don't know if they'd want to or if they have other plans." Filipe said uncertainly.

"That's fine. If they decide that they'd like to go, you can be at my house on Saturday... do you know where it is?"

"Everyone knows where it is." Filipe said frankly.

Paul nodded slowly, he had kind of suspected that.

As they approached the entrance to the non magical part of the school, Paul quickly added, "I forgot to tell you that we'll also be inviting some non magical people to the cookout. I don't know how your host family feels about that, but I figured that you'd need to know about it going in."

"I don't think they'll have a problem but it's good to know that before we get there." Filipe said thoughtfully.

"Paul! Over here!" A voice called.

After a glance, Paul turned to Filipe and quietly asked, "Would you like to sit with us at lunch?"

"Stevie's going to expect me to sit with her." Filipe said regretfully.

Paul nodded as he and Filipe walked over to where G was waiting for them.

"G, this is Filipe. He's my teammate in Basic Magic."

"It's nice to meet you Filipe. Did Paul already invite you over to the house this weekend?"

"Yeah. I don't know if my host family will want to." Filipe immediately answered.

"Well, I hope you can make it. My dad's great at cookouts. We'll have a lot of fun."

When G said that, Paul quickly added, "And if any of you play a musical instrument, bring them along."

"That really *does* sound like it's going to be a lot of fun." Filipe said honestly.

"Thanks for waiting." Vinda called out as she and Nazzy approached.

"Nazzy and Vinda, this is Paul's teammate, Filipe. We were just trying to convince him to come to the cookout this weekend." G announced.

"You really *should* go. D's cookouts are epic!" Vinda said happily.

"And you'll never taste better bar-b-que in your life." Nazzy added.

"You're all going to be there?" Filipe asked curiously.

"Yeah. It's just us and our parents, so far. We're still going to invite a few more people." Paul confirmed.

"I'll see if my host family is interested. It sounds like it's going to be fun." Filipe said sincerely.

"There he is!" Nazzy announced, drawing everyone's attention.

"Well, now that Curtis is here, we can go have our lunch." Nazzy said, then started walking, not waiting to see if the others were going to follow.

"Curtis is a non witch." Paul whispered to Filipe as discretely as possible.

As Curtis approached, Paul continued, "Curtis, this is Filipe, he's from one of my other classes."

"It's nice to meet you." Curtis said automatically.

"Let's talk on the way." G said as he started walking.

Paul noticed that Nazzy had slowed down and was looking back at them urgently.

"I was just telling Filipe that we're going to be having a cookout at my house this weekend and my parents wanted for me to invite some friends over." Paul said to Curtis as they walked.

"It sounds like it's going to be fun." Filipe interjected.

"So if you and your family aren't doing anything, we'll be leaving from my house at noon on Saturday. We're going to be having a cookout and if you or your family play any kind of musical instruments, bring them along." Paul said pleasantly.

"I don't know... we never go anywhere." Curtis stammered.

"Just ask them. If you show up, I know that we'll all have a good time. If you don't, no one will be upset about it or anything." Paul said easily.

"And all of us are going to be there." Filipe added, then quickly amended, "At least, I'll be there if I can talk my host family into it."

"If they have other plans that don't have to include you, they could drop you off." G said from nearby.

"And all of you are going to be there?" Curtis asked slowly.

"Yeah. Barring unforeseen circumstances." Paul confirmed.

"Do you smell that? I think they're having roast beef!" Nazzy said happily.

"I'm guessing that's a good thing." Paul said slowly.

"Nazzy loves the roast beef that they serve here." G said with a grin at his friend.

Paul saw a flash of red out of the corner of his eye and quickly said, "Go on. I'll catch up to you. I've got someone else to invite."

The others watched as Paul dashed away.

* * * * *

"Dex! Do you have a minute?"

"What do you want?"

"To invite you over to our house on Saturday. We're going to be having a cookout and our parents asked us to invite a few friends."

"Me?"

"Yeah. I know that you probably won't want to, but I just wanted to make sure that you know that you and your family are invited. If you decide to go, we'll be leaving from our house on Saturday at noon."

"No. But thank you for the invitation."

"That's okay. But if you change your mind, just show up on Saturday before noon. If you're there, you'll be welcome, if you're not, no big deal."

"Thank you."

"Oh, yeah. If you *do* decide to come with us, make sure that you bring any musical instruments that you play. We're all going to be doing that. And the other thing is, we'll be inviting some non magical people to the cookout too, so be sure to let your parents know about that."

"You're inviting non magical people? Why?"

"Because they're our friends. Well, Curtis is our friend, so him and his family are invited."

"You're having a gathering and you're inviting non witches... and you're going to play music?"

"Yeah. And we'll probably eat too much and talk and maybe even do silly stupid things, just because we can. I don't know for sure. This will be my first real cookout." Paul said honestly.

"I'll think about it, okay?" Dex said quietly.

"That's great! I hope you'll come." Paul said happily, then thought to add, "You can sit with us if you want. We still have room at our table."

"No, I..." Dex began to say, then seemed to change his mind. "Do you think anyone will mind?"

"I can't see why they would. Come on. I've heard that the roast beef is really good. I can't wait to try it." Paul said as he indicated the serving line ahead of them.

Dex silently followed and appeared to be on the verge of a panic attack.

* * * * *

As Paul and Dex were leaving the serving line, Paul quickly whispered, "Curtis is a non witch, so no magic talk at the table. Okay?"

"That won't be a problem." Dex said anxiously, but seemed to be a little calmer than before.

Paul led the way to the table and said, "Hi Karras. How are you doing today?"

"Everything's fine so far."

"Stevie knows where I am, so I can eat with you." Filipe said as he hurried to take a place at the table.

Paul smiled, then said to the group, "For anyone who hasn't met him, this is Dex. He rides the school van home with me and G."

"It's nice to meet you Dex. I've seen you around, but I don't think that we've met before." Filipe said pleasantly.

"Dex, this is Filipe, Nazzy, Vinda, Curtis, Karras and of course, you already know G." Paul said as he indicated each in turn.

"Hi." Dex whispered.

"So, did Paul already invite you to the cookout?" G asked curiously.

"Yes. I said that I'd think about it." Dex quietly mumbled.

"You should go. D's bar-b-que ribs are legendary." Nazzy said enthusiastically.

"And if you don't like meat, he has a lot of other foods that you'll enjoy." Vinda helpfully added.

Dex nodded that he had heard, either due to his shyness or his mouthful of food.

"So are you new here too?" Curtis asked Dex curiously.

"No. I've been here forever." Dex quietly admitted.

"Yeah. Dex has been going to school with me and Nazzy and Vinda since we were all little kids, but we've never really talked before. I'm not sure why." G confirmed.

"I think it just works out that way sometimes. We have different interests and stuff and there's never been a reason for us to get to know each other." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"I guess so." G easily agreed, then said to Dex, "Well, I'm glad that you're here with us now. Hopefully you'll decide to go with us this weekend and you'll have a good time."

"Do you play a musical instrument?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"Yes. The violin." Dex said quietly.

"Really? That'll be great! I hope you can make it!" G said enthusiastically.

Paul smiled lovingly at G, appreciating his unbridled emotionalism.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone concentrated on their meals until it was broken by Nazzy saying, "If no one else is going to say it, I'll just ask. Paul, did you *really* hit a girl and get sent to the office today?"

Paul looked up with surprise and had to swallow before responding, "How did you know about that?"

"Everyone knows about it. So, is it true?"

"A girl named Katie or something like that tried to '*accidentally*' push me and knock me off balance. But when she did, she went off balance instead and hit her head. The teacher was there and saw everything. I didn't get into trouble, but I had to go to the office to tell my side of the story."

"You weren't hurt, were you?" G asked with concern.

"No. If she hadn't fallen down, I probably wouldn't have noticed anything. I was talking to Arjun at the time and I didn't even know that she was there."

"So you're not in trouble?" G asked to confirm.

"No. Everyone I talked to just wanted to be sure that I wasn't having too many problems fitting in here." Paul told his concerned friends honestly.

"If they have any doubts, they should just look at who you have lunch with. That should prove that you're doing alright." Karras said frankly.

"Unless they see us as bad influences or something." Nazzy added helpfully.

Paul looked from Dex to Filipe, then to Karras before saying, "I seriously doubt that they'll worry about *you*corrupting *me*."

"How did your trip to the bank go, Curtis?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"I did like you said and paid attention and even asked a question. I don't know if I really learned that much, but the teacher seemed really impressed that I was interested at all."

"If that's all you got out of it, then I'd still call it a success. When the teachers get the idea that you're paying attention, they'll usually go out of their way to see that you get the most out of their classes."

"What about you, Paul? Did you volunteer for any more big projects?" Vinda asked teasingly.

"I didn't exactly *volunteer*. But because of the project that Filipe and I presented today, we're going to get to work on a bigger and better one, using what we learned on this one." Paul said carefully.

"What kind of a project is it?" Curtis asked curiously.

"It's kind of like a smartphone app. It was a good idea and the teacher thought we accomplished a lot with it, but if anyone ever actually installed the thing, it would probably blow up their phone." Paul finished with a shrug.

"You've got a class where you develop smartphone apps? How can I get into that?" Curtis asked hopefully.

"I don't know if you can. You probably have to have good grades in a lot of other classes before they'll let you in. But if you're really interested, either talk to your teachers or someone in the admin office. If they know that you're interested, they'll bend over backward to make sure that you can take the classes that you need, to learn 'real world' skills." G said frankly.

"This is so new to me. The schools I went to before just taught us a bunch of useless stuff because it was required. Here, not only do they teach us stuff that we'll actually use, but they also try to teach us stuff that we have a talent for and that we're interested in." Curtis said thoughtfully.

"I guess that's why they can charge the big bucks." G said frankly, then quickly added, "It's about that time."

Paul looked down at his plate and was surprised to realize that during their conversation, he had finished his meal. He had a vague notion that the roast beef had been good, but he couldn't remember anything about the food beyond that.

"Everyone, remember that we'll be leaving from our house at noon on Saturday. If anyone doesn't know where that is, just ask and I'll be happy to give you directions. Remember to bring your musical instruments and maybe a jacket, in case it decides to turn cold or windy before we're finished." G said to the entire group.

"Everyone here is invited?" Curtis asked as he looked around.

"Yes. You, your parents and any other family that's in town." G confirmed, looking at Vinda as he said the last bit.

"You've gotta figure that with so many people, you won't have to worry about your parents being able to find someone to talk to. It's not like they'll be sitting on a park bench watching you 'play'. It will be something for them to do as much as for us." Paul added.

"Yeah. I think I'll be able to talk them into it." Curtis said thoughtfully.

"We'd better go. The bell's going to ring soon." G said as he stood.

"Just so there's no doubt in anyone's mind, all of you are invited to keep having lunch with us if you want to. If you don't want to, that's fine. We won't hate you or anything. But if you want to, you'll be welcome." Paul said as he looked around the group and made a point of focusing on Dex.

* * * * *

When they walked out of the lunchroom, Curtis was the first to break away from the group. Once they were in the magical hallway, Dex and Filipe were next to depart, going off in the same general direction. G was the last to go. He made a point of giving Paul a firm kiss and a whispered, "I love you." before he also went on his way.

"Are you really okay?" Nazzy asked Paul with concern.

"Yeah. I'm just not used to having people hating me and wanting to hurt me. I'm more used to being ignored." Paul said frankly.

"Do you want to go back to the way things were?" Karras asked curiously.

"No." Paul answered immediately, then thought that he should explain, "Even if there were a way that I could go back, I'm not the same person that I was before. Being here and doing all of this has changed me. The person that I am today couldn't go back and live the life of the person that I used to be."

"I'm guessing that you're not talking about the magic." Vinda said quietly.

"No. Think about how I was at lunch just now, when there wasn't any magic being used or even discussed. I'm a lot different than I was when I first met you two." Paul said seriously.

"I guess you are." Vinda said slowly.

"Do you like who you've become?" Nazzy asked curiously.

"So far, I think I like who I'm becoming." Paul answered thoughtfully.

"Me too." Nazzy said simply, then thought to add, "And don't get hung up on missing who you used to be. He's still here too. I see him sometimes, in the in-between moments."

Although Paul wasn't entirely sure what that meant, he was willing to accept the truth of it.

* * * * *

Once they were inside the Wizardry classroom, Nazzy and Vinda continued on to the other side of the room while Karras lagged behind a little.

"You're the only you that I've ever known. Just in case you're wondering or worried about it, I think you're okay."

"Thanks. I needed to hear that. With everyone telling me how great I'm doing at combining all the little beginner spells, on top of me being adopted by a rich and powerful guy, it'd be really easy for me to become an arrogant asshole. I'd really appreciate it if you'd warn me if you see that I'm starting to buy into all of that."

"I'm surprised that you'd ask me when you already have such good friends who care so much about you." Karras said frankly.

"Yeah. Well, I care about them too. But since they've seen how I *was*, it seems to me that they might get caught up in the 'amazing transformation' of Paul. The reality is that I'm just adapting to a bunch of new circumstances. I haven't done anything more amazing than learn how to use the new tools that I've been given. And those are the same tools that just about everyone else could also use if they ever really thought about it."

"Good afternoon." Professor Ortega said as he walked into the classroom, leading a procession of teachers.

"Given the fine job that everyone's been doing, it was my thought that we might take some time to focus on precision and fine tuning. Although a spell may execute properly and produce the desired result, that doesn't necessarily mean that it was performed as well as it could have been.

"Today I would like it if all of you, in your individual projects, would pay extra attention to the details of your spells and diagrams. Do your best to elevate them from a 'competent casting' to an 'art'. If you have a favorite spell, take the time to give it polish and finesse.

"Be prepared to demonstrate your spells not only before your classmates, but also before a group of wizards who understand the nuances of what you are doing and give them something to appreciate.

"Now go and work on your individual projects and I will circulate amongst you. Try to remember that you are not only learning how to harness incredible powers, but also that you are becoming masters of a craft. You have a right to be proud. Carry yourselves with dignity and self-confidence. From what all of you have demonstrated thus far, you've earned that right. Good afternoon." Professor Ortega said to the assembled wizardry students.

> '*Regardless of how smart or powerful Professor Ortega is, he's also incredibly inspiring.*'
>
> '*Just listening to him makes me want to do my best work.*'
>
> '*Even if he didn't have any magical ability at all, I'd want to listen to him and make him proud.*'
>
> '*After all the years and all the schools that I've been through, I've finally met a* ***teacher***.'

* * * * *

As Paul walked into their study room, he noticed that Nicholas and Amelia were at their cabinets, gathering their supplies.

Rather than doing the entire spell to summon his familiars internally, Paul decided that he would follow Professor Ortega's advice and do the long version.

Paul sat cross-legged and took in a deep cleansing breath.

After slowly releasing it, he calmly looked over the expanse of empty floor before him, raised his arms and spread them wide as he internally called upon the proper summoning diagram with his Wizard's light.

The pentagram appeared in sharp glowing detail.

Paul took a moment to look it over, making an extra effort to see that nothing was being wasted. Every line and symbol was in its proper place and each performed a specific function.

Satisfied that his spell diagram was as near to perfection as he could make it, Paul then called upon the fireballs to serve as candles. He used Ginh Zah's hellish version of the fire spell, since the conduit he was trying to establish created a gateway to hell.

Although the fireballs appeared to be virtually the same as the 'natural' fireballs that Mr. Gilbert had taught him, the magic that created them and the magical energy they in turn provided had a distinctly 'hellish' flavor.

Paul noticed another demonic influence nearby and realized that it was coming from his backpack.

He moved away from his summoning diagram for a moment to discover the source of demonic magical energy.

As soon as he touched the skaalix, he knew that he had found what he was looking for.

Paul set his backpack aside and took the skaalix back to his diagram.

He once again sat cross-legged as he held the skaalix in his cupped hands.

Although the skaalix was created from natural materials, it's design was of infernal origin and Paul's alterations had made it even closer to its demonic counterpart.

Paul could feel the demonic power coursing through him as he channeled demonic energy from the skaalix, through himself, and into the spell.

The flow of demonic energy once again reminded Paul of what Dr. Williams had told him on his first day. Different magic responded to different emotional states.

In a voice that might easily be misconstrued as anger, Paul began to speak aloud the words of his spell.

"*The time has come*.

"*Follow my voice*.

"*Your master summons you*.

"*Come to me now.*"

Rather than a grayish blur in the center of the summoning diagram, this time an actual visible opening appeared. The manifestation of the vortex was an interruption in their dimension.

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah both came walking through and looked around curiously.

Paul smiled at their appearance, then noticed that Nicholas, Amelia and Mr. Gilbert were all watching him carefully.

"*What I have opened, I now close.*" Paul said as he concentrated his power and watched the intrusion of a foreign reality collapse in upon itself.

"*What I have closed, I now seal.*" Paul continued, mostly for form's sake.

"Expertly done." Mr. Gilbert said appreciatively.

"Thank you." Paul said as the balls of fire and spell diagram disappeared.

"The refinements that you've made look very professional. May I assume that you're doing so in preparation for giving a demonstration to the greater class tomorrow?" Mr. Gilbert asked hopefully.

"No. Not exactly. I'm planning to do a presentation, but I'll be doing something else. I guess I was just inspired by Professor Ortega's speech and decided that I wanted to do Mah Zah and Ginh Zah's summoning spell a little bit more formally." Paul said as he set the skaalix aside and proceeded to cuddle his demons.

"What's that you've got there?" Mr. Gilbert asked as he looked at the skaalix on the floor.

"It's a skaalix. I needed a divination tool in Augury class and ended up with this." Paul said simply.

"Is it real?" Mr. Gilbert asked slowly.

"Are you asking if it exists?" Paul asked slowly, honestly not understanding Mr. Gilbert's intended meaning.

"No. I mean, is it authentic?" Mr. Gilbert asked as he knelt beside Paul to look at the skaalix more closely.

"It's a replica. It didn't work when I found it, but Mrs. Cualla let me make a few changes to it so that it would work." Paul said cautiously, mostly due to Mr. Gilbert's strange fascination.

"May I touch it?" Mr. Gilbert asked slowly.

"Sure. Go ahead." Paul said as he perched Ginh Zah on his right shoulder.

"Do you realize what this represents?" Mr. Gilbert asked slowly as he stared at the motionless device.

"As far as I know, it's just a toy." Paul said honestly.

"The movements of this device are intended to represent the interactions of the known realms." Mr. Gilbert said quietly, then carefully brushed one of the inner spheres through the cutouts to set the device into motion.

"So, it's like a hellish model of the solar system?" Paul guessed.

"Not precisely. I'd liken it more to the models that were created to predict the movements of the planets and constellations in relation to the Earth." Mr. Gilbert said quietly as he studied the device.

"So... what? Does it have some kind of a use besides being a toy?" Paul asked cautiously.

"In the realm where it was created, it might be used to predict the ebb and flow of powers... much like what you're learning in Astrology, except that this model probably establishes a particular hell dimension as being 'the center'."

"Right. So everything that it predicts is from the point of view of that one focal dimension and if you tried to use it anywhere else it wouldn't work?" Paul asked to confirm his understanding.

"I believe you could still use the item if you were aware of which dimension the device is configured to emulate." Mr. Gilbert said speculatively.

"Is there any way to know that?" Paul asked curiously.

"Perhaps Amelia might be able to recognize a pattern of movement and extrapolate the point of origin."

"But if I'm understanding you right, this thing will predict where different realms are and will be in relation to each other."

"Yes. That way, if you're wanting to access power from one realm or wanting to negate the effect of another, you'll be able to make such preparations in advance."

"But couldn't you also use it to pinpoint when and where another dimension will brush up against ours? I mean, it sounds to me like with this little gizmo, even a non magical person might be able to cross dimensions because they'd be able to predict where and when two dimensions would brush up against each other and temporarily intersect."

"Well that's a bit of a leap in reasoning, but I can't definitively say that it's impossible." Mr. Gilbert said slowly.

"But if I'm right, this could be a roadmap to dozens of different natural, demonic and angelic dimensions. Someone from hell, an actual *demon*, could travel to the natural world without a summoning spell. The most they might need would be a naturally occurring portal like a mirror or an archway."

Ginh Zah gave a chattering growl which caught Paul's attention.

"Yeah. That makes sense." Paul said slowly.

"What did she say?" Mr. Gilbert asked curiously.

"She said that because of the configuration of the skaalix, that it might be possible to focus your magic through it to use it to create a portal."

"Please try to keep in mind that this is a replica. That, in itself, might indicate that this device may not yield accurate projections."

"Yeah. But if Amelia can pinpoint which dimension this thing belongs to, then we should be able to test if it's working or not. Either the dimensions are lined up where it says they should be or they aren't." Paul said reasonably, then thought to add, "I really need to find out where Mrs. Cualla got this. I'd like to know who made it and what they pretended that it was supposed to be for."

"Did you say that you modified it from its original form?"

"Yeah. All the parts were there, but they were made of the wrong materials. I used some basic elemental manipulation to change the materials to make it so that it would work."

"If the parts were made correctly, but of the wrong materials, that might indicate that the person... or being... who crafted it might have found themselves stranded here, in our dimension, without a way to return to their own."

"And they might have thrown this thing together, using the materials that they had available, hoping that it would work well enough to get them home."

"If they were a native of a hell dimension, then they probably wouldn't have been able to construct such a thing. They would be very limited in the amount of time that they could spend incarnate on this plane of existence."

Mah Zah yipped once, then made a quiet whimper.

"Right. Mah Zah says that if they had the ability to shapeshift, that they might have been able to stay here long enough to make a skaalix."

"If they have the magical ability to shapeshift, why don't they simply perform a reverse summoning and return to their realm of origin?" Mr. Gilbert asked curiously.

Ginh Zah mewed and chattered to Paul for a moment, then scrambled down off his shoulder, digging her little claws in every step of the way.

"I'd put you down if you asked." Paul said as he clutched at the minuscule injuries.

Ginh Zah looked back at him and meowed once rather indignantly.

Mr. Gilbert waited for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "What did she say?"

"She said, 'What do you expect? I'm a demon.'"

"What's she going to do?"

"She's going to show you why demons trapped in the natural world can't reverse summon their way back home."

Chapter 11

A little bark from Paul's shoulder caused him to jump. He had been so intent on watching Ginh Zah that he had forgotten that Mah Zah was still there.

Mah Zah launched herself off Paul's shoulder and into the air.

Paul instinctively tried to catch her, but before he could, her body had transformed into its red and black amphibious form and seemed to have also grown bat wings somewhere in the process.

"That's rather... disturbing." Mr. Gilbert said honestly.

"I guess Ginh Zah and Mah Zah are spelling partners so they both need to be involved for any of their bigger spells to work." Paul carefully explained.

Mah Zah screeched and Ginh Zah meowed at the same time.

Paul rolled his eyes, but continued to watch as Ginh Zah also transformed into her demonic visage.

"What is it?" Mr. Gilbert asked with concern.

"They're more than spelling partners." Paul said simply.

"Oh. How progressive of them." Mr. Gilbert said uncertainly.

"Ginh Zah, are there demons who don't have magic? You know, like the non magical people we have here?" Paul asked curiously.

The little 'dragon' creature hissed in his direction, then began flying in a long slow arch in a counterclockwise circle.

"She said there are." Paul said distantly as he focused the majority of his attention on what Mah Zah and Ginh Zah were doing.

The pair of them were flying in circles at a dizzying speed and Paul noticed a vortex forming in the floor.

A hiss from the flying demons drew Paul's attention and he immediately tried to *see* into the spell that they were casting and the vortex that was manifesting.

"That's enough. I've got it." Paul said toward his demons.

The two demons stopped flying in circles and finally came to rest on Paul's shoulders.

After listening to them for a moment, Paul turned to Mr. Gilbert and said, "You know those limitations that you use to keep the portals small and to stop the wrong things from going through? The portal that they create has those limitations fixed in place. They can't change them and it keeps them from passing through. It's possible for them to make a portal into hell that *we* can pass through, that is, if

they could open one big enough. But no matter how big it is *they* can't pass through it themselves. It's that way for all demons. They are incapable of creating a portal to give themselves access to our world or to return to their own. The only way they can come here is if they are summoned."

"I don't understand why that is." Mr. Gilbert said honestly.

"It's an ancient curse that's been placed on all demons. It puts limits on the magic they can use, I guess to keep them from flooding into the natural realm and destroying us all."

"Who cast the curse?"

"The gods."

"Which gods?"

"That's a good question. From what Ginh Zah said, it's no one who exists in hell today. And I'm guessing that it's not someone in the natural plane either."

"Do you suppose it might be someone from the angelic realm?"

"It could be, but if I were guessing, I'd say that it's probably someone else. Someone who doesn't come to any of our realms very often. From what little I know of the angels, they wouldn't want to limit the demons, they'd want to utterly destroy them."

Mr. Gilbert slowly nodded, then turned his attention to the Yaggoral on Paul's shoulders before saying, "Although I've encountered many demons in my time at this school, I can't say that I've had much of an opportunity to witness demonic spellcasting before. It was a rare treat. Thank you both for your demonstration."

Ginh Zah screeched once in reply, then dug in her claws as she began to transform.

Mah Zah started her transformation a moment later.

Paul grimaced in pain until both had returned to their 'natural' forms.

"If you're interested, perhaps we could see if Amelia might be able to find anything out about your... what did you call it again?"

"It's a skaalix." Paul said simply, then added, "Actually, I think asking Amelia is kind of a longshot, but it won't hurt anything to try."

* * * * *

"Amelia, please excuse the interruption, but would you mind helping us with something?" Mr. Gilbert asked hopefully.

"I guess so. But I'm ready to summon Nomia. Can I do that first?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"Yes. Your spell diagram appears to be expertly done. Please proceed."

After a moment of watching, Paul turned to Ginh Zah and quietly asked, "If you can't open a portal for demons, does that mean that you are capable of summoning a natural creature to the demon realm?"

Ginh Zah alternately growled and chattered her response.

When Paul didn't seem to be inclined to share, Mr. Gilbert quietly asked, "What did she say?"

Paul turned to Mr. Gilbert and translated, "She says that while she *could* summon a natural creature to The Meayithan Realm, the problem with that is that it would take more magical energy than she has to do it. But even if she could summon a person, anyone she could summon would become sick and die. Just like any *thing* that she could summon would decay within hours. It's usually just not worth it."

"When *is* it worth it?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

They stood and watched Amelia's summoning for a long moment before Ginh Zah reluctantly mewed her answer.

"They consider it worth it when they can receive more magic than they spend. Human anger and frustration can generate enough magic to sustain them for a while. So they do little things that will prompt big reactions."

"What do they end up summoning?"

"Cell phones, TV remotes, car keys, single socks... They usually end up putting them back once they've gotten the reaction that they need. Well, except for the socks. They're snuggly." Paul finished with a shrug.

"Does that mean that they can see into our world?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

Before Paul could answer, Nomia appeared in the middle of the summoning diagram.

"How are you doing today, Nomia?" Amelia asked happily.

The little 'demon sprite' happily clicked and chattered her answer and no one present needed a translation.

"Mr. Gilbert? I'm ready." Nicholas said from nearby.

"Excuse me." Mr. Gilbert said as he stepped away.

"Now, what was it you were needing?" Amelia asked as she stood, holding Nomia in her cupped hands.

"Mr. Gilbert thought that you might be able to help us figure this thing out." Paul said as he held out the skaalix.

"What is it?" Amelia asked curiously.

"It's a skaalix. At first I thought it was just a toy, but Mr. Gilbert thinks that it might be able to be used as a navigation tool for the different realms. The problem is that you probably need to know which realm it was designed for before you can use it." Paul explained.

"That wouldn't make any sense." Amelia said immediately.

"Why's that?" Paul asked curiously.

"What good is a map if you already know where you are? It's more likely that this is used like a sextant to determine your location in the grand scheme, then after you know that, it can point you in the right direction if you know where you want to go."

"Do you think you can figure out how to read it?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Some of the patterns look familiar, but I'm going to need to check out some things. Can I hold on to it for a little while?"

"Sure. I still have a lot of work to do on my presentation for tomorrow. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help you."

"I think that Nomia and I will be fine. All we'll need is some time."

Paul smiled at the answer, then went across the room to the table where he could sit down and focus on his own work.

* * * * *

Mah Zah let out a little yelp alerting Paul as Mr. Gilbert approached.

"You seem to have quite the project going on." Mr. Gilbert said as he noticed the several open books before Paul.

"Yeah. I'm trying to find out as much as I can about portal interactions." Paul said as he looked up from his reading.

"I doubt that you'll find very much on the subject. I don't know of many people who use embedded summoning portals."

"Yeah. That's what I'm getting from what I've been reading." Paul agreed.

"What are you trying to do?" Mr. Gilbert asked curiously.

"It's just my presentation for tomorrow. I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind. I want it to be a surprise."

"Why does that frighten me?"

Paul laughed, then said, "There's nothing to be scared of. I won't actually be summoning anything. Besides, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah have used this spell a lot. They'll make sure that it's safe."

"I assume that Amelia agreed to investigate the function of the skaalix."

"Yeah. From what little she said about it, I get the feeling that she actually *is* the perfect person to analyze it." Paul confirmed.

"Is there anything that you'll be needing to further your study for your presentation?"

"Just time. I want to go through everything and make sure that there's no possibility that I'm about to do something monumentally stupid."

"I'm hesitant to allow you to proceed without knowing more of what you intend to do. I not only have a responsibility to you, but also to the rest of the class." Mr. Gilbert said honestly.

"Here. Look at this." Paul said as three summoning diagrams appeared on the floor beside them.

"I see what you mean about not summoning anything, although I can't see the point of creating the portals if you don't use them." Mr. Gilbert said honestly.

"That's the part where I'm asking you to trust me. The first diagram is just a standard summoning diagram, like what I'd use to summon Mah Zah and Ginh Zah. The second is a reverse summoning diagram like I'd use if I wanted to go to visit them in their realm for a while."

"You haven't done that, have you?"

"No. Maybe I'll do it someday, but I need to learn a lot more about my magic before I start travelling between realms." Paul said frankly.

"What about the third diagram? From the formation of it, I can't begin to determine its purpose."

"That's because it isn't for summoning. I really don't want to spoil the surprise, but if you look at it, you can see that it's nothing dangerous."

"I don't know what you're going to use it for, but I agree that it doesn't appear to do much of anything. I don't see any harm in allowing it."

"Thank you sir. I'll get back to my studying now."

* * * * *

Ginh Zah growled in warning, drawing Paul's attention.

"Paul, can I ask you a question?" Nicholas asked uncomfortably.

"Yeah. What's up?" Paul asked as he noticed that Frederick was perched, squatting on Nicholas' shoulder.

"I've noticed that you can talk to your familiars and that Amelia can talk to Nomia. Is there any way that you can fix it so that I can talk to Frederick like that?"

"Mah Zah and Ginh Zah did that themselves. They cast a spell to let me understand them. I don't know any spells like that but maybe they can help you."

Ginh Zah meowed seriously and Paul turned his attention to Frederick to wait for his reaction.

After a moment to consider, the small demon growled and hissed his response.

Paul looked to Ginh Zah for a translation, but instead heard Ginh Zah meow and chatter at Nomia.

Before long, all the demons were talking, each in their own versions of speech.

Paul wasn't catching enough of their conversation to make sense of it but was content to wait until a consensus had been reached.

After a time, Ginh Zah finally relayed their conclusion to Paul, who in turn passed it on to Nicholas. "Frederick doesn't have the ability to cast the language spell that he would need to make you understand him. Mah Zah and Ginh Zah's spell is rooted in the magical bond we have, so that won't work for you. Nomia has a spell that she can cast, but she'll have to cast it on you and Frederick."

"The spell will just be to let me understand Frederick? It won't do anything else?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

Ginh Zah mewed and Paul nodded before saying, "You'll understand each other. It goes a little deeper than spoken words, there's an empathic aspect to it, too. But it's the only spell that Nomia knows that might be able to help you."

Mah Zah gave a quick bark, and Paul nodded in response. "Mah Zah says that it's also possible to enchant the same spell onto charms for you and Frederick to wear. But Frederick would have to leave his charm here, in this realm, when he returns to his home."

"Can we do it now?" Nicholas asked slowly, then explained, "We'll be having demonstrations tomorrow, so we won't be able to do anything extra."

"What do you say Mah Zah? What would it take to do it?" Paul asked curiously.

Mah Zah whined and whimpered a little before Paul finally nodded.

"Okay. I think I can handle that. I know the spell to make the charm hold a charge, but I'm not sure about the spell to convert potential energy into magic. I've only seen it done once." Paul said to Mah Zah.

A bark and a yip was Mah Zah's response.

Paul nodded then turned to Nicholas and said, "I'm going to need charms for the two of you, some quartz crystals, a rowan wand, and something to use as a source of enduring energy, like a battery."

"Where am I supposed to find all that stuff?" Nicholas whined.

"I don't know. Maybe someone else can make you a charm with less supplies, but this is the only way I know to do it." Paul said frankly.

Nomia clicked and chattered, drawing Paul's attention.

"As long as Amelia doesn't mind, we'd be happy to have your help." Paul responded to the 'demon sprite' with a smile.

"Can you understand her?" Nicholas asked with surprise at the exchange.

"Yeah. In a way. I can't speak her language, but I could tell that she was offering to help." Paul said simply, then thought to add, "Maybe you could ask Mr. Gilbert if he can help you collect some of the items. For all the different spellcasting going on around here, they must have a supply room or something."

"Aren't you going to help me?"

"You're my teammate, so I'll help you do the things that you can't do for yourself, but I'm not going to waste my time gathering your supplies for you."

"That's kinda mean." Nicholas grumbled.

"Yeah. Well, I might go out of my way and help out someone who liked me but since it's you who's asking, you're on your own." Paul said with a grin, then walked back to his table to continue his studying.

Nomia started rapidly clicking and Paul looked at her curiously. It took him a moment to realize that it was Nomia's way of laughing with delight.

* * * * *

"Will this work?" Nicholas asked abruptly, jarring Paul out of his reading.

"Were you sleeping on the job?" Paul asked Mah Zah on his shoulder.

The puppy made a slight whine which made Paul smile.

"What did she say?" Nicholas asked suspiciously.

"She said that she's on guard for threats and she's determined that you're not one." Paul said simply, then asked, "What have you gotten?"

"These necklaces can be used as charms..." Nicholas began to say when Paul interrupted.

"Snowflakes?"

"Does it really matter what they are?" Nicholas countered.

"No. I guess not. What else were you able to find?"

"Here's your rowan wand, your quartz and a battery." Nicholas said as he placed the items on the table before Paul.

"Okay. Ginh Zah, go get Nomia and ask her if she's ready. She'll need to be the one to cast the actual spell on the charms." Paul said as he stood.

Ginh Zah dug her claws in as she transformed, then set her claws deeply into the flesh of Paul's shoulder before pushing herself into the air.

Paul reflexively clutched his shoulder as he called after her, "Don't forget, I'm part demon too."

After gathering everything that they would need, Paul walked into an open area in the middle of the room and placed things where he would need them.

"Did you need me over here for something?" Amelia asked as she walked up to Paul and Nicholas.

"Actually, we're going to need for Nomia to cast a spell. She's the only one who knows it and has access to the magical specialty to cast it. But if she told you that you were needed here, she might need you to back her up." Paul said honestly.

"What is it that you're doing?" Amelia asked curiously.

"Creating a set of translation charms for Nicholas and Frederick." Paul said simply.

"And you need for Nomia to help you?"

"Yeah. She's the only one who knows the spell."

"Way to go, Nomia!" Amelia said happily, then turned to Paul and added, "I think I've done all that I can with the skaalix."

"Did you figure out anything?"

"Only that it's way too complex for me to decypher. You might try showing it to Mrs. Tabbert and see if maybe she can make something of it." Amelia said as she handed the skaalix back to him.

"I may do that next time I have Astrology. But for right now, we have some amulets to enchant." Paul said frankly and noticed that everyone, including Mr. Gilbert, were standing by, watching what he was doing.

After a slow breath to calm himself, Paul cast his Alchemy spell diagram, a golden circle surrounding a blue square.

He placed the amulets in one quadrant and the quartz crystal into the diagonal quadrant of the square, then picked up his rowan wand. Since he appeared to have

an audience, he felt the need to put on a bit of a show. As he touched the rowan wand to each of the corners of the diagram, small self-contained fountains sprang up.

"*Water into Earth, Earth into Water, two become one. That which Water has alone, now so does Earth. That which Earth possesses, now so does Water. Let it be that when the one becomes two, that both retain the memory of what it was to be more. Let them retain the capacity and the will. So shall it be by my command.*" Paul said, then watched as the quartz and the amulets merged together for a moment.

With a wave of his wand, the spell diagram and water dissipated.

"Ginh Zah, are you sure you can do this?" Paul asked as he created a circle surrounding a triangle.

Since she was still in her 'dragon' form, her answer was a screech rather than a meow, but he understood it just the same.

"Okay. Let me get this set up, then I'll leave you to it." Paul said as he moved the quartz out of the way and put the 9-volt battery in place.

Mah Zah suddenly vaulted off Paul's shoulder and transformed in mid air. She once again had bat wings and flew around the room once before finally coming to rest at Ginh Zah's side.

Paul added the text to the spell diagram then backed away as he said, "That's everything I know about it. The rest is up to you."

Ginh Zah squawked to indicate that it was sufficient, then went into action.

Balls of fire suddenly appeared at each corner of the diagram.

Paul nodded his approval of what they were doing.

Both Mah Zah and Ginh Zah began walking around the perimeter of the spell diagram on all fours while making almost imperceptible straining sounds.

Paul visibly winced because the sound was like the manifestation of effort expressed in a purely auditory medium.

Ginh Zah suddenly stopped walking and screeched. It only lasted a moment, but Paul was frozen in place with fascination as he listened. Mah Zah then stopped and did the same identical thing. They alternated that way several times until Paul noticed that after the last time they walked away from the diagram.

"Is that part done?" Paul asked curiously.

Ginh Zah squawked once to tell him it was.

"Good. Then our charms are powered up, all that's left is to cast the spell and to make it stick." Paul said confidently as he dispelled the thaumaturgy diagram and

replaced it with a pentagram. It took him an extra moment to fill in the text of the spell from memory, making slight changes to adapt to the objective that they were trying to achieve.

Ginh Zah chittered in a low voice, drawing Paul's attention.

"Yeah. That sounds good to me. Just let me know if you need me to do anything." Paul said calmly.

Ginh Zah chittered again, then waited for Paul to relay her message.

"Amelia, you and I need to focus our attention and support our demons. We need to be ready to step in and help them out if they fall short either in magical talent or magical ability." Paul said calmly.

"What do we need to do?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"If Nomia needs your help, be willing to take over for her and do what she tells you. If Nomia says that you have the ability to cast the spell, I'll believe her."

"Okay. I think I can do that." Amelia said quietly.

"Good. Even though I don't know much about cementing the enchantment onto a charm, I've seen it done once and nothing about that made me feel like I *couldn't* do it. So if Mah Zah or Ginh Zah need me to, I think I'll be able to finish the spell for them." Paul said confidently.

Having said so, fireballs sprang to life at the five points of the pentagram.

Tiny little Nomia began walking around the spell diagram clicking and chattering at a steady pace.

Although Paul felt the urge to smile at just how cute she was, he was able to hold his expression due to the seriousness of the task at hand.

At the point where Nomia completed one circuit around the diagram, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah began casting their spell.

While Paul could understand their language, the manipulations of magical energies that they were describing in their spell were still outside his area of expertise.

His logical mind could see what they were doing, but internally, he didn't have the same comfortable familiarity that he felt with Wizardry.

Although Nomia didn't stop her spellcasting, she paused for a moment to touch the first point of the pentagram.

She continued on, touching each point of the pentagram, while also continuing to cast her spell.

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah continued unabated, doing their wholly unrelated spell which would eventually intersect with Nomia's spell and bind it to the amulets.

Paul, Amelia, Nicholas, Frederick, and Mr. Gilbert watched silently as the three demons continued to cast their spells.

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah stopped in unison. They both reared up on their hind legs and appeared to freeze in place as they waited for Nomia to complete her spellcasting.

When Nomia finally stopped her spellcasting, she ran toward Amelia with her arms outstretched, looking for all the world like a young child wanting to be held and fawned over.

Amelia didn't disappoint.

"Is it done?" Nicholas asked uncertainly.

"It should be, give me a few seconds to see what it looks like." Paul said as he focused on the amulets, trying to see the spell housed within.

Everyone waited as Paul concentrated and eventually started to slowly nod his head in approval.

"So you believe that the spell will do what it is supposed to?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

"I don't know anything about that. But it looks like the amulets have been changed to carry a charge, then they were filled with magical energy and now the spell that Nomia cast has bound to the amulets and is being fueled by them. That's exactly what we were trying to do. As far as what the spell actually does when you put the amulets on... we'll just have to wait and see. I can't understand what Nomia says and I'm not familiar enough with the type of magic used on the amulets to be able to interpret it."

"Mr. Gilbert, do you think it's safe for us to put the amulets on?" Nicholas asked hesitantly.

"No." Mr. Gilbert answered simply, then added, "But if you only want to do what's safe, you should probably give up demon summoning."

"You're a dick!" Nicholas said sourly.

"Yes. I suggest that you remember that in future." Mr. Gilbert said with a smile.

Nomia chattered something from Amelia's cupped hands and Paul could tell that she was talking to Frederick.

"Do it or don't. I don't know about anyone else, but I have other things to do." Paul said frankly.

Nicholas sneered at him, but finally took Frederick off his shoulder and set him on the floor.

Frederick didn't need any encouragement, he immediately reached down and picked up one of the necklaces.

Nicholas was a little more reluctant, but took the other necklace into his hands.

"Is there an incantation needed to activate the spell?" Mr. Gilbert asked cautiously.

Nomia chattered something, then Amelia said, "No. They just put them on and it should start working."

Nicholas looked down at Frederick, then slowly and carefully pulled the necklace over his head and placed it around his neck.

Frederick followed his motion and carefully put the necklace on. The pendant of Frederick's necklace reached nearly to his knees.

"Can you understand me?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

Frederick growled and hissed his response.

"What did he say?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"He said that he can understand me just fine... and he seems to have a British accent." Nicholas said uncertainly.

"I don't see any problem with that. He seems like a nice enough chap." Paul said with a grin.

Frederick hissed something and Nicholas' eyes went wide with surprise.

"What did he say?" Paul asked curiously, intrigued by Nicholas' reaction.

"He said that he loves you." Nicholas said disbelievingly.

Paul shifted his gaze toward the small demon and could see the adoring look in his eyes.

After a moment to process the emotional impact, Paul carefully said, "I can't wait to get to know you, Frederick. I hope that we'll have many opportunities to work together in the future."

Frederick shyly turned away, then tightly clutched Nicholas' leg.

"I think he hopes that too." Nicholas said reluctantly.

Ginh Zah let out a brief screech to draw Paul's attention.

"That's right. We have work to do. If no one needs me for anything else, I've still got a few things that I need to work out before tomorrow." Paul said seriously.

"Are you done with that?" Mr. Gilbert asked as he pointed at the pentagram.

"Yeah." Paul said as he waved his hand and the diagram disappeared.

"That thing you did with the water... I've never seen that done before. Could you show me that spell sometime?" Amelia asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Just remind me and I'll write it down for you. Right now, I still have a lot of work to do."

"Is it anything I can help with?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"No. I've got to do this myself. But thanks for looking at the skaalix for me. I don't know enough about Astrology and the different realms to recognize their patterns."

"I wish that there were more that I could do, but I doubt that anyone with less than a master's degree would be able to get much farther than I have. It's just too high level."

"I'll keep that in mind. For now I'll just keep hold of the skaalix and use it as a divination tool."

"Can you even *do* that?"

"*I* can. From the way things turned out, I think it's because it has some sort of a link to the demon realm. If I had encountered another demonic device first, I might have been able to use it instead." Paul said thoughtfully.

"From what I've heard, a lot of people have divination tools that have a personal meaning to them. I don't know if there's some sort of a magical connection or if it's more of a psychological thing, allowing you to use something that's meaningful to you to interpret the future."

"So what does that say about the people who use runes and tarot cards?"

"Maybe that they lack imagination or any connection to anything out of the ordinary. They probably live in beige apartments and wear fashions inspired by The Brady Bunch."

"Riiight. I'd better get back to work now." Paul said before cautiously backing away.

Amelia turned her attention back to Nomia and began talking to her softly.

* * * * *

Paul was drawn out of his studying by the sound of spellcasting.

He turned to see Amelia beginning her spell and Nicholas making his preparations.

"I guess it's time for you two to go back." Paul said regretfully.

Ginh Zah looked Paul in the eyes, then transformed herself into her demon form.

"What?" Paul asked cautiously.

She growled and screeched for a moment, then waited for his response.

"I don't think there's going to be any trouble."

She hissed slightly as a reply.

"Okay. If I run into a problem, I'll call you, I promise. I've seen your magic and I know that you can be vicious... especially with your claws."

Ginh Zah seemed to be satisfied by the response and made a little screech in Mah Zah's direction.

The puppy began to climb down off Paul's shoulder, but before she could take more than two steps, he picked her up and placed her on the floor.

Ginh Zah joined her and once the two were together, Paul did the short-version, no-frills reverse summoning to send them back.

* * * * *

Although Paul had started his reverse summoning last, he finished long before either of his classmates, so he gathered his things and went into the central classroom to wait for the final bell.

As he walked into the room, his spirits fell as he noticed Carla.

"How DARE you come back to class after what you did to Katie! They should throw you out of this school! You don't belong around decent people!" Carla snarled.

Paul stared at her for a moment, then noticed someone across the room and started to walk away.

"Don't walk away while I'm talking to you! YOU CAN'T IGNORE ME!" Carla bellowed.

"What's wrong with her?" Karras asked as Paul approached.

"From the look of her makeup today, I'm guessing that she must have broken her trowel. That probably put her in a bad mood." Paul said simply.

When Carla caught up to him, she screamed at the top of her lungs, "LISTEN TO ME! I'M TALKING TO YOU! DON'T IGNORE ME!"

People were peeking out from the different study rooms to see what all the commotion was about.

Professor Ortega crossed the room and quietly asked, "Is there a problem?"

"No sir. Good afternoon. How have you been?"

"DON'T IGNORE ME!" Carla screamed.

"Very well..." Professor Ortega responded, then looked to Carla and asked, "Miss Wells, did you have a problem of some sort?"

"He's a monster! He hurt Katie and changed into a demon and put a curse on all of us! You need to get rid of him! RIGHT NOW!" Carla bellowed.

"I've heard about the incident that occurred earlier and Mr. Darroch has been absolved of any wrongdoing. As to him being a monster, that's a very cruel and hurtful thing to be saying about one of your classmates. I would remind you that while you are in my class that you are expected to behave with civility and decorum." Professor Ortega said reasonably.

"HE'S A DEMON!" Carla screeched.

"Perhaps he is, in some sense of the word, but that is simply a circumstance of his birth. If you will calm down, perhaps you will see that you're overreacting..."

"CALM DOWN?! How can you expect me to calm down when that soul-sucking life-destroying monster is allowed to be here in your class with us?!" Carla screamed.

"Miss Wells, you are barred from this class and you will not be allowed to return until we've had a disciplinary hearing regarding your conduct. Hopefully, once you've had a chance to cool off, you'll be able to voice your concerns and listen to reason." Professor Ortega said firmly.

"I'm not leaving! I'm not going anywhere! If anyone's going to leave it should be him! He should go back to hell where he belongs!" Carla spat venomously.

"I've asked you politely and you've refused to leave. What happens next is no fault of Mr. Darroch. It is a consequence of your own behavior." Professor Ortega said simply, then gestured toward the other side of the room, beckoning the teachers gathered there to come near.

"Miss Oaken, please escort Miss Wells to the administrator's office and await my arrival there. If she says or does anything that will endanger the school, you have my permission and support for whatever measures you deem necessary." Professor Ortega said firmly.

"Yes sir." The female teacher said seriously, then turned to Carla and asked, "Will you come with us, Miss Wells?"

"I'm not going anywhere!" Carla declared.

The female teacher uttered a magical phrase in Latin. Although Paul could understand the words clearly enough, he couldn't make sense of the spell that was being cast. Once again, it was a variety of magic that he had no affinity for or knowledge of.

A blank look came over Carla's face, then she began to walk robotically toward the door.

"That's much better." Professor Ortega said with a smile.

"Yes sir." Paul agreed.

"Although I would prefer to protect you from people such as that, I believe that it's important for you to understand that there *will* be people who will hate you simply for the fact of your heritage." Professor Ortega said regretfully, then added, "I hope that you didn't take any of her slurs and insults to heart."

"No sir. In fact, when she called me a soul-sucking life-destroying monster, all that I could think of was the irony of *her* calling anyone else that." Paul said honestly.

"It appears that class is nearly at an end. It is my sincere hope that you will have an enjoyable remainder of your day." Professor Ortega said courteously.

"Thank you sir. I hope that yours is enjoyable too." Paul responded with a smile.

Professor Ortega glanced at the door, then said, "Doubtful, but I appreciate the sentiment."

"Yes sir." Paul said after Professor Ortega as he began to walk away.

As Paul turned, he saw Nazzy, Vinda and Karras all waiting anxiously to speak with him.

He smiled and felt contentment in his heart as he walked to join his friends.

* * * * *

"What the hell happened?!" Nazzy exclaimed as Paul approached.

"It was just Carla being Carla. I wouldn't worry too much about it. I'm sure that she'll snap back, kiss some ass and be back tomorrow like nothing happened." Paul said easily, then thought to ask, "How was your day?"

"Vin was able to do this really awesome ghost summoning. It fully manifested and even told us its name." Nazzy said excitedly.

"That sounds great. Are you going to do that for your demonstration tomorrow?" Paul asked curiously.

"Probably not. That spell has a high failure rate. Just because I made it work once doesn't mean that I can do it again." Vinda said seriously.

"Let's get back to Carla. What happened to cause that?" Nazzy asked firmly.

"I exist. That's what happened." Paul said simply.

"There's got to be more to it than that. Did you say or do something to set her off?"

"I walked into the room. That's it. I don't know what triggered her insanity, and to tell you the truth, I really don't care."

"It's true. I was there." Karras said quickly, "Paul didn't have a chance to say a word. She tore into him when he stepped through the door."

"Carla's always been mean and stuck up, but in all the years that she's been going here she's never lost it like that before." Nazzy said slowly.

"Lucky me. I get to be the object of her psychotic break." Paul said wearily, then continued more strongly, "Listen, I don't care what her problem is. I just wish that whatever it is that she'd leave me out of it. We've got our group presentation tomorrow morning and then I have another one to do on my own in the afternoon. The last thing I need is to be distracted by a screeching swamp donkey with too much makeup."

"Feeling the pressure, huh?" Karras asked with concern.

"A little, yeah." Paul admitted.

"Well, I can't help you with your presentation for this class, but you don't need to worry about the Spelling class presentation. It looks great." Karras assured him.

Paul betrayed a small smile, then quietly said, "Thanks Karras. I know you're right, but there's no way I can stop worrying about it. I have to be as prepared as possible. I won't give it less than my best."

The bell ringing stopped any further conversation.

Paul walked out of the classroom with his friends and noticed that some of the other members of the class were looking at him warily.

He couldn't fault them for that.

If they had heard what Carla was saying, it would only be right for them to be suspicious of him.

For a moment he considered that it might have been better if he had restrained himself and not revealed his demon form in class, but something inside him rose up to protest the thought.

If he hid his 'dark secret', he would forever be holding himself back for fear of drawing too much attention.

'*If I'm going to be damned, I'll be damned for being myself.*'

"Well, it looks like you can forget everything else for a few minutes. There's G." Nazzy said with a smile.

Rather than wait for G to join them, Paul broke away from the group and walked up to G, pulling him into a firm hug.

The others watched with matching smiles, knowing that despite what Paul had said earlier, that he *had* been bothered by Carla's outburst to some degree. But they also knew that all that was wrong was being made right within G's arms.

"What's wrong?" G asked with concern at Paul's uncharacteristically enthusiastic public display of affection.

"Nothing now." Paul assured him.

"Paul had another run in with Carla." Vinda said quietly as the rest of the group approached.

"Fluffy bunny attack, huh?" G gently teased.

"You have no idea." Paul quietly responded, then quickly added, "But I don't want to talk about Carla. What do you have planned for tonight?"

"I have a little homework and then I have to do some more work on Lex."

"I have a lot of work to do too. But do you think we need to do anything more with the presentation for Spelling?"

"No. I think we're good. Anyone who wants to can go over their part again, but as a group, I think we've got it." G said confidently.

"Yeah. What about you guys? Any big plans?" Paul asked the rest of their group.

"I think Vinda and I will probably go through our part of the spell at least once, to make sure that we have the timing down but besides that, I don't think we have anything." Nazzy said thoughtfully.

Paul looked at Karras inquiringly.

"I'm probably going to be working on my summoning. After seeing what all you guys are doing, I've realized that I need to step up my game." Karras said frankly.

"Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help you. Remember that I've already been through what you're going through now." Vinda quietly offered.

"Thanks. If I get stuck, I may ask for your help." Karras said timidly.

"Real world." Nazzy warned as they approached the merging point with the regular school.

"Do you think it would be best if we didn't mention the cookout while we're in the van."

"Yeah. If Sandy finds out about it, she'll automatically assume that she's invited."

"Hey Curtis! How was your day?" Nazzy called out cheerfully.

"It was good. I guess that since I asked questions yesterday and got involved, that the teacher decided that she'd give me some extra credit work." Curtis said happily.

"And that's a *good* thing?" G asked slowly.

"Yeah. Instead of trudging through the same boring stuff as everyone else, I'm getting to work on *actual* case files to try and calculate the best financial strategies for people based on their individual needs."

"Sorry, but I don't see the good part." G said honestly.

"It's *real*. It's not pretend made up problems just to demonstrate a theory. It's like you were saying, I'm getting to see how this stuff applies in real life."

"I said that? Well then, it must be true." G finished with a grin.

"Paul!" A voice called out.

"Hi Kinney. What's up?"

"I was just wondering if you had any more problems. Have they got back at you yet?"

"Not yet. But Carla had a meltdown and got taken to the principal's office, so that means that they're probably not too worried about me at the moment."

"They still might try to get revenge."

"Yeah, they might." Paul agreed, then quickly added, "We've got to get to our vans now. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. Later." Kinney said before heading off in a different direction.

"What happened?" Curtis asked curiously.

"Nothing important. I'll see you tomorrow. Don't forget to talk to your parents about coming over on Saturday."

"Don't worry! I won't forget!" Curtis promised as they walked out the front door of the school.

* * * * *

The ride home was quiet and uneventful.

Paul noticed a few uncertain glances from Dex, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

When they arrived at the house, the sound of heavy equipment was the first indication that something out of the ordinary was going on.

The handwritten note on G's door was the second.

"It sounds like Dad's got them started on building your room." G said as they walked inside.

"I thought that he'd ask me about how I wanted it to be before he started it." Paul said honestly.

"I think he did. You told him that all you wanted was a glassed in hallway." G said frankly.

"I was in shock. He can't hold me to that." Paul argued.

"Actually, I think he can." G said simply, then quickly added, "The note said that they'd, be waiting for us in the parlor. We'd better hurry."

"Do you think that they're asking us to go in just to tell us what we've already figured out?"

"Probably. Just humor them. Remember, they're old."

"Yeah. I'll try to act surprised. It's only right considering all that they do for us." Paul agreed.

"I guess we'll have to go the long way around." G said when he found the door to the connecting hallway locked.

Paul walked to the nearest window to look out at what was being done, but found that the window was covered by a tarp.

"Come on. Let Dad spring his 'surprise' on us." G said as he started toward the front door.

"Yeah. I can think of worse things." Paul said with a smile at the thought of his adoptive father wanting to spring a surprise on him.

* * * * *

G and Paul walked through the front door of the main house and on through to the parlor.

As soon as they stepped through the parlor door, all their preconceived notions about D's announcement evaporated into nothing.

"Oh good! We were just talking about you. Come on in!" D said delightedly.

Although Paul recognized the people from the wedding, he was fairly certain that he'd never been introduced to them or learned their names.

"Kyla and the kids just got back from Scotland and dropped in for a visit before going back to their regular lives." D said pleasantly.

"Come on over here G and give me a hug." Kyla said as she stood from her place on the couch.

Paul looked on warily as G complied and was hugged enthusiastically.

"Kyla and Star volunteered to help me go over the design for the baby's room and I thought it might be nice if you boys took Lucky with you while we're doing that."

Beth said as she looked Paul in the eyes, silently conveying that it was more of a command than a request.

Paul looked at the children, who appeared to be twins, and deduced that the girl was Star and the boy was probably Lucky.

"I want to get started as soon as possible." Beth continued, as though they had agreed and everything was settled. "You boys have fun!"

As G was released from his hug, he looked down at the younger boy and said, "Come on, Lucky."

Paul noticed that the boy seemed uncertain, but followed along as he was told.

'*Just like the rest of us.*'

* * * * *

"We'll have to go outside to get to my room." G said as he led the way down the hallway.

Lucky was silent and kept sneaking glances up at Paul.

When G noticed, he said, "That's Paul. He's my new brother."

"Does he play the wish game?" Lucky asked timidly.

"Yeah. Don't worry, he's a witch. But I'm glad that you asked before you said anything about magic. Paul and I have some friends who aren't witches, so it's best to ask if you aren't sure." G said as he opened the front door.

"The wish game?" Paul asked cautiously.

"It's a way that kids can ask if someone is a witch or not without being obvious about it. What Lucky just did was perfect. If it turned out that you weren't a witch, then I would have told him 'no' and he wouldn't do any magic or talk about it in front of you." G explained.

"You don't know about the wish game?" Lucky asked Paul curiously as they walked around the side of the house.

"Paul just found out about magic last week. He was born a witch, but since he never knew that he had magic, he never tried to use it before." G said as they walked.

"Mama says that I'll probably start using 'real' magic soon. Right now I can only do the little magic." Lucky quietly admitted.

"What kind of little magic?" Paul asked curiously.

"I can make lights and fire and I can even make things move a little bit. Star can't do that and she's really jealous of me." Lucky said proudly.

"Well, I've only been doing magic for a week, so I don't know much more than that. Maybe I can show you a few of the spells that I've learned and you can show me some of yours?" Paul asked hopefully.

"You don't have to play with me. I'm ten. I'm not a baby." Lucky firmly declared.

"Okay. But I'd still like to show you what I've been able to do with lights and fire. Maybe it's something that you haven't thought of." Paul said with a smile.

"Paul, you are *not* allowed to show him how to summon demons." G said firmly.

After a glance at G to gauge his sincerity, Paul looked down at Lucky and whispered, "He's no fun."

Lucky was oblivious to the exchange as they walked in through the front door of G's room.

* * * * *

Once they were inside, Paul asked Lucky, "Can you show me a Wizard's light?"

Lucky did the simple hand gesture and spoke the words. As soon as he did, a single dot of light appeared, floating in the air between them.

"Can you make it longer?"

"No. How do you do that?" Lucky asked curiously.

Paul didn't say the words aloud, since they were the same words that Lucky had used, but made a point of doing the hand gestures slowly and carefully so that Lucky could see the difference in what he was doing.

When Paul completed his spell an eight inch long light appeared.

"Can you do that?" Paul asked seriously.

Lucky seemed to be uncertain, but did his best to replicate Paul's movements as he spoke the words of the spell.

When a Wizard's light didn't appear, Paul gently told him, "Try again. You've got to make every gesture just right or the magic won't know what it is that you're trying to do."

"You're really good at teaching." G said with a smile as he watched Paul do the gestures again.

"I just learned this stuff myself, so I think that makes it easier to explain." Paul said with a smile back at him.

Lucky slowly and carefully tried again to make his Wizard's light line.

Paul silently watched, paying careful attention to every gesture so that he could show Lucky where he needed to improve.

When Lucky was finished, a golden line of light was suspended in the air between them.

"Good. That's perfect." Paul said happily.

"I did it! That wasn't hard at all!" Lucky said excitedly.

"The next thing I'm going to show you is a spell diagram. I don't expect you to be able to make one like mine, but once you see what I can do with Wizard's lights, maybe you'll want to work with them so that you can do different things for yourself." Paul quietly explained.

Lucky's attention was more on the line of light that he had created than what Paul was saying.

Regardless, Paul did the long version of the spell with all the hand signs included in making a pentagram.

It took a moment for Lucky to draw his attention away from his line of light, but soon he was fascinated by Paul's complicated gestures.

When the gestures were complete, Paul released the magic to fuel the spell and the pentagram appeared on the floor between them.

"Wow! That's a lot!" Lucky gasped.

"Yeah." Paul agreed with a smile, then made the gesture to create the balls of flame.

Lucky took a step back when the fire came into being.

"There's a long spell for the next part, but I'm going to do most of it internally so it won't take a lot of time. Besides, G doesn't want me to teach you summoning." Paul said with a grin before enacting his summoning spell.

When it was complete, Paul said aloud, "*The time has come*. *Follow my voice*. *Your master summons you*. *Come to me now.*"

Lucky watched in wonder as a puppy and a kitten walked out of the fracture in reality.

"Lucky, this is Mah Zah and Ginh Zah." Paul said formally, then continued, "Mah Zah and Ginh Zah, this is Lucky. I think he's our cousin or something like that."

"Second cousin." G supplied.

"You *made* a puppy and a kitten?" Lucky asked in amazement.

"No. I summoned them. I moved them from one place to another." Paul patiently explained.

"Can you show me how to do that?!" Lucky asked hopefully.

"No. Maybe when you get your 'big' magic you'll be able to do something like that, but what I wanted to show you was the summoning diagram that I use. I was thinking that you might want to practice with your Wizard's light and maybe even come up with something I haven't tried."

"Are you going to leave me alone?"

"No. G and I will be right here with you. We both have stuff that we have to work on for school right now, but you can work on your Wizard's lights while we're doing that."

After a long silent moment, Lucky quietly said, "I don't know how to start."

"G, can you help me for a minute?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Sure. What did you need?"

Rather than answer verbally, Paul gestured to an open area just as a stone pillar emerged from the floor.

"Oh, okay." G said simply, then made a quick lifting gesture, installing his illusionary overlay on top of Paul's construct.

"How did you do *that*?" Lucky asked in amazement.

"There's a whole lot to it, but it all starts with Wizard's lights. If you can stretch them into different shapes, change their colors and move them around so that you can stack them or place them end to end, you can make something kind of like this." Paul carefully explained.

"This is the project that we're presenting in class tomorrow. There are going to be four of us casting the spell to create this all at once." G added helpfully.

"Four people casting the same spell at the same time?" Lucky asked disbelievingly.

"No. We'll be casting four different spells, but all the spells will be working together to make this." Paul said as he gestured to the pillar.

"I can't make something like that!" Lucky exclaimed.

"I'm not asking you to. I'm just saying that if you can make your Wizard's lights do different things, you may be able to come up with something crazy and wild and special. You won't be coloring in a book that someone else created with the lines already drawn for you. You'll be using the tools that you naturally have to create something that's all yours, from beginning to end." Paul said seriously.

"My magical specialty is illusions, so if you get stuck, I may be able to help you. Bringing dreams to life is kinda what I do." G said with a grin.

"And since I'm so new to magic, what I'm learning to do is combine all the little spells that I've been learning so that I can make them do bigger and more interesting things." Paul added.

Ginh Zah meowed, gaining Paul's attention.

"Right. I need to get to work right now. Go ahead and try some things and we'll be right here if you need us." Paul said as he picked up Ginh Zah and placed her on his right shoulder.

Mah Zah barked once, then waited.

"I think I'm going to need you both for this. But if we can get my presentation perfected, then maybe you can spend some time with G and Lucky later." Paul said as he reached down and picked up the puppy.

"They're going to help you?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Actually, the presentation that I'm going to do was their idea. I'm adapting a spell of theirs so that I'll be able to show it to my class tomorrow."

"Are they shapeshifted, like what Uncle Gawain does?" Lucky reluctantly asked.

"Yes. They're both shapeshifted." Paul said simply, feeling that it was best not to discuss demons with Lucky at this early stage of their relationship.

Ginh Zah meowed again and Paul responded, "I know. I'm getting started now."

"I've got to get to work, too." G quietly told Lucky, then added, "I'm sorry that we don't have a lot of time to visit with you right now, but if we can all get our stuff done and out of the way, maybe we'll be able to do something together later."

"No. It's okay. I think it's better if you let me do magic and stuff like what you're doing." Lucky said quickly.

"Okay. Then let's get to work." G said with a smile as he raised his arms in a 'lifting' gesture. Directly in front of him, 'Lex' appeared.

Lucky stared in wonder, but held himself back from interrupting G while he was working.

After the initial shock had worn off, Lucky turned his attention back to Paul to find him standing over a glowing spell diagram on the floor. The kitten and puppy were perched on his shoulders and appeared to be studying the diagram as well.

Paul muttered something, then Lucky noticed that some of the symbols in the diagram changed.

Lucky finally decided to do as Paul had suggested and began to create a Wizard's light. His gestures were slower and clumsier than usual due to his uncertainty about altering the properties of a spell that he had always used in its default form.

A few minutes later Paul looked up from what he was doing and noticed that Lucky appeared to be enthralled with all the different sizes, shapes and colors that he could create.

* * * * *

"Paul, when you have a minute, could you look at this for me?" G asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I've just been waiting for Mah Zah and Ginh Zah to agree on the next part of the diagram before I can do anything more anyway." Paul said as he took his familiars off his shoulders and placed them on the floor at the edge of the diagram.

"You don't have to tell me that the face doesn't look right. I'm going to work on that next. But I think I'm done with everything else. Have a look and see what you think." G said as he stood aside.

"The butt's not right. It needs to be perkier."

"How do you make a butt 'perky'?" G asked incredulously.

"Make it a little fuller and a little higher up. It's too flat the way it is now." Paul said seriously.

"Come on! You're just making that up, aren't you?" G asked uncertainly.

"How often do you look at your butt?" Paul asked firmly, then before G could answer, he continued, "And how often do *I* look at your butt?"

"Fuller and higher. Got it." G finally conceded.

Paul walked around 'Lex' to get a good look at the front.

"Fuller and higher?" G guessed before Paul could say it.

"He needs a bulge. It doesn't have to be anything obvious or gross. But he needs to look like he's got *something* between his legs." Paul said slowly.

"I thought about that, but I didn't want for people to laugh at me for making him... you know, hung like a horse." G said frankly.

"I think they'll laugh at you worse if you make him neuter." Paul said honestly.

"Fuller, higher and make sure he has something in his package. That shouldn't take me too long to fix." G said as he moved around to look at Lex from another angle.

A simultaneous bark and meow caused Paul to look back to his spell diagram.

"It looks like they've come to an agreement. I'd better get back to work." Paul said, then seemed to change his mind as he turned and asked, "How are you doing, Lucky?"

"How do you make another one the same as the first?" Lucky asked curiously as he looked up at Paul.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're asking me." Paul said honestly.

"Your Wizard's lights. When you make a special one, how do you make another one just like it without having to start all the way at the beginning and change the color and size and shape and everything?" Lucky asked seriously.

"That's a really good question. The answer comes down to how you think about your Wizard's lights. If you look at the spell that you already know as being *The* Wizard's light spell, then you'll probably have to keep going back and fixing it over and over and you'll probably give up on ever trying to do anything different with it because it's boring and too much trouble." Paul said frankly.

"So how do *you* do it?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"I'll show you." Paul said easily, then a stone wall rose up out of the floor, right beside where they were standing.

"How did you do that?" Lucky asked in amazement.

"Ask me again later and I'll tell you. But for right now, let me show you how I can make all the different Wizard's lights." Paul said as the stone wall began to fill with glowing writing.

"The first spell is just the basic Wizard's light, so you can look back to it when you need to. The next one is the Wizard's light circle. Whenever I need a circle, I can use that spell and then just adapt the size and color to what I need it for. Then we have Wizard's light writing. After that is the Wizard's light plotter, for 3D shapes. Each one of these is a different spell which uses the Wizard's light spell, but is also different in the way that it works. If you want to make three blue tumbleweeds, first make one, then make a spell all of its own for it. Then you can cast that spell two more times and as many more times as you want after that."

"Okay. I think I can do that." Lucky said slowly.

"Good. Then the next step is to make something... maybe a snowman. To make it, you'd take three of your tumbleweeds and make them different sizes and stack them on each other. Could you do that?"

"Yeah. Probably."

"Then the next spell you make is your Wizard's light snowman spell that has everything that you need built into it. Once you've done that, you can create as many snowmen as you want, just by casting that one spell instead of starting with a little dot of light each time." Paul carefully explained.

"Yeah. I can do that!" Lucky said with a huge grin.

"I can't wait to see what you come up with. But for right now, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah need for me to work with them to figure out how to make their spell work in this world."

"Okay. I got this." Lucky said happily as he started his next spellcasting.

* * * * *

"*Boys, it's time to come in to dinner.*" Beth's voice called over the intercom.

"Good. I'm hungry. Besides, I think I need a 'mental health break'." G said as he looked up from his work.

"Me too. I'm tired of concentrating."

A meow drew Paul's attention and he nodded in Ginh Zah's direction.

He wasn't in the mood to put on the whole production, so he made a simple gesture, mostly to indicate where the portal was going to form.

As soon as it was open, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah scampered through.

"Wanna take a look at Lex before I put him away?" G asked hopefully.

Paul approached and took a long considering look before saying, "His eyes are too close together and his mouth is too full."

"Be nice! I've been working hard on him." G said playfully.

"Oh? Did you want me to lie to you?" Paul asked with a smile.

"No. I guess not." G reluctantly admitted.

"He looks great. I just thought that you needed to know what I spotted as being out of place. I could see how it might be difficult for you to identify something like that since you've been staring at it for so long." Paul explained.

"Yeah. I can tell that something's off, but it's hard to know what." G admitted.

"Lucky, are you ready for dinner?" Paul thought to ask.

"I'm almost done with this. Just a minute." Lucky said in deep concentration.

Paul and G walked over to where they could see what Lucky was doing.

Lucky was concentrating and muttering the words of a spell as he made relatively complicated hand gestures.

Both looked on critically, trying to detect any fault in his technique, in case his spell failed.

When Lucky was done, a swirl of Wizard's lights came into being.

Paul was astonished by the way that the dots of lights slowly moved in different directions, leaving lighted trails in their wake.

It was almost like watching a three dimensional picture drawing itself.

When the tangle of lights stopped moving, Paul suddenly realized what Lucky had drawn.

"It's Ginh Zah!" Paul blurted out.

"Yeah. But it's not quite right yet. And it'd be better if it wasn't glowing." Lucky said as he stopped to look over his handiwork.

"If you want, I can show you how to change the luminosity properties after we've had dinner. It's easy." Paul assured him.

"Do you think it looks good?" Lucky asked eagerly.

"Yeah! If I were drawing Ginh Zah she'd be made up of little cubes. You did it all with lines. It looks great! A whole lot better than what I could have done." Paul assured him.

"Come on. They're probably waiting for us and we're going to have to go the long way around." G quietly interrupted.

"Do you think it's okay?" Lucky asked him hopefully.

"It looks great. In fact, as soon as I'm done working on Lex for the night, I'd like to get a look at the spell you're using. Although I could make an image of Ginh Zah with illusions, I don't think there's any way that I could do it with Wizard's lights." G said honestly.

Lucky beamed at the praise for his work.

"Does anyone need to put anything away before we go?" G asked as he looked at Paul's spell diagrams still glowing in the area where he had been working.

"I want to be able to pick up where I left off when we get back." Paul said frankly.

Lucky seemed to be reluctant, but he finally dispelled his Wizard's light drawing.

"Come on." G said with a smile at the younger boy, then draped an arm around his shoulders as he guided them out of the room.

Paul followed with a smile at the scene.

Chapter 12

As they walked into the dining room, Paul was prepared for Lucky's excited and rambling tale of his adventures and accomplishments.

However, Paul was pleasantly surprised to find that Lucky did none of that. When asked, he simply acknowledged that he had fun.

Paul's relief was short lived. Lucky's subdued response set off warning bells within Paul and he suddenly found that he had a desire to understand what was going on in the younger boy's mind.

Lucky was a rather ordinary looking boy with nondescript brown eyes and hair. He wasn't unusually cute, nor was he at all ugly.

Average.

That was the only description that Paul could come up with that in any way fit.

Paul was quiet as he tried to identify what it was about Lucky's behavior that was disturbing him.

Lucky was quietly enjoying his meal and seemed to be eagerly following along with his mother's description of the plans for the baby's room. But Paul could see something hiding behind Lucky's expression. There was a falseness. Lucky was going through the motions, playing along, doing as he was expected to do.

Just as Paul was about to give up on his speculation, he was assaulted by the answer.

Looking at Lucky was almost like looking at himself, just a few years before.

He still couldn't pinpoint exactly what was disturbing him about that fact, but he couldn't deny that the feeling growing in him was a sense of kinship.

"How have you boys been?" D asked curiously, breaking Paul out of his speculation.

"I think we're okay. We just have a lot of work to do for tomorrow. G and I both have presentations that we have to prepare for." Paul said honestly.

"We're going to be looking at color swatches after dinner. I suppose that Lucky can join us so you two can be free to focus on your schoolwork." Kyla announced.

"That's okay. Lucky can go with us. He's no trouble. In fact, he's kind of inspirational." Paul said quickly.

G looked at Paul curiously, but didn't contradict him.

"Are you sure he won't be bothering you?" Kyla asked cautiously.

"Like I said, he's inspirational. I think having Lucky with us will help us both do a better job on our work for tomorrow. He'll actually be helping us." Paul said with conviction.

"Okay. If you're sure..." Kyla trailed off uncertainly.

Paul flashed Lucky a quick smile, then went back to eating his meal.

* * * * *

"So, I'm guessing that you boys must have noticed the construction that was going on. What do you think?" D asked pleasantly.

"We heard it, but we didn't see anything. The windows are covered and the door to the walkway was locked." G said frankly.

"Oh. I hadn't realized that. Well, I suppose it makes sense. Right now the workmen are excavating so that they can lay the foundation. They'd want to keep everything covered up while they're kicking up dirt and rocks. Hopefully, the construction will end up not being too much of an issue. You'll still have G's room, just like before, and most of the work will take place while you two are in school."

"Any idea of how long it will take before it's finished?" G asked curiously.

"When it comes to construction, I've learned not to count on anything going to schedule. There are too many factors outside of our control that can cause things to go awry. It will take as long as it takes. No longer."

"I bet you're a lot of fun at contract negotiations." G said dryly.

"I like to think so." D responded with a grin at his son, then added, "Hopefully one day you'll find out."

* * * * *

The rest of the meal went off without incident.

Paul half listened to his mom and Kyla talk about their plans for the baby's room. Occasionally Star would add some inane comment on the subject, to which her mother would respond with beaming pride and praise for her daughter.

When Paul would look back at Lucky, he would find the boy watching everything, but Paul got the sense that Lucky was divorced from any emotion regarding it. He was an impartial observer witnessing events that had nothing to do with him.

Paul knew that feeling all too well.

In fact, years of his life had been spent in that state of mind.

As the trio walked out of the dining room, Lucky quietly said, "Thanks for telling my mom that you wanted me to go with you. I don't know what those color swatch things are, but it sounded like it was going to be really boring."

"Boring doesn't begin to describe it." Paul said honestly.

"Besides, I can't wait to see what else you're able to do with your Wizard's light sculpture. Paul was right. Seeing you being creative is inspiring. It makes me want to do a better job on my illusions." G said pleasantly.

"If my mom knew what I was doing, she'd say that it was cute. She'd say that I was playing. But you make it sound like I'm doing something that matters, like I'm learning something good, that I'll be able to use someday." Lucky said thoughtfully.

"Moms see us as their kids. Just about anything we do looks like playing to them. Don't let it get you down. The real payoff comes when you show them that you've done something special, that they can't dismiss. They're blown away because they're used to thinking of you as a helpless child." Paul said sagely.

"My mom and Star are interested in all the same things. They do girly stuff together all the time." Lucky said regretfully, then quietly added, "Sometimes I wish that I was a girl too, so that I could do stuff with them."

"There are plenty of girls who don't like doing girly things and would feel just like you're feeling now if they were part of your family. I think you're better off being yourself."

"But I'm alone."

"Most of us are alone. Sometimes it sucks, but sometimes it's nice. It makes you appreciate the time you have with the people that you enjoy."

"You *like* being alone?" Lucky asked dubiously.

"Sometimes it's nice to be alone. That's usually when I have my best ideas and do my best work. But when I'm with other people, I enjoy that too. I guess it's all about trying to see the best in whatever situation that you're in and making the most of it." Paul said honestly.

"That's what you do, isn't it?" G asked curiously.

"That's what I *try* to do. But I still do my share of bitching and whining about things."

"You never complain about anything." G said simply.

"Well, maybe not too much out loud, but it's there. I promise."

'*You honestly have NO idea.*'

* * * * *

As the trio walked into G's room, Paul said, "Lucky, before we get started, why don't I go ahead and show you how to adjust the Wizard's lights so that they'll look solid."

G watched with interest as Paul explained and demonstrated his variation of Wizard's lights.

Paul's enthusiasm was contagious and by the time he was finished, Lucky couldn't wait to get back to work.

Lucky appeared to be fascinated by the fact that by slightly altering certain of the gestures that he had always used that he could essentially redefine the resulting spell.

G noticed that Paul appeared to be in his 'presentation mode' as he summoned Mah Zah and Ginh Zah. Paul made the full glowing spell diagram as well as grand gestures and a dramatic casting of the last few spoken words of the spell.

Although G knew that it was mostly for show, he appreciated that Paul was excited about using magic and showing off his newly acquired skills.

G pondered over the fact that magic had always been a fact of his life. He derived little joy or pleasure from it. Magic was simply another tool available for him to use.

Every now and then he would have occasion to do something special, like the grand illusion that he created after the wedding. But for the most part, being a witch was just another label that he wore, one of many. And, as with all the others, the label came with its own responsibilities and privileges.

Suddenly, G realized that he was standing and staring at Paul. He honestly didn't have time to be woolgathering. He had a project to present the next day and it was far from being ready.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Lucky?" Paul asked as he approached.

"Are you done with your stuff?" Lucky asked curiously.

"No. I've run into a little problem. The oculus diagram isn't working right. Mah Zah and Ginh Zah are digging into the spell to try and figure out why. I don't know enough about how it works to do much more than get in their way." Paul said frankly.

"So you're going to use a spell that you don't understand how it works?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But we all do that, don't we? Every time you use a spell that someone else wrote, aren't you trusting that they knew what they were doing so that you can use their spell, even though you don't completely understand it."

"I guess so. I mean, I used Wizard's lights before and I didn't even know half of what it could do." Lucky easily agreed.

"How's it going? Have you made any more progress with it?"

"I got stuck on something else. I'm trying to give my Ginh Zah fur, but it looks wrong."

"Oh. Fur. That's a tough one. I haven't tried to do that yet."

"There's no way that I can make each hair. But if I try to make clumps of hair, it comes out all wrong." Lucky said grimly.

"You might try 'drawing' the hair. Maybe make a flat plane... like a square, then using lines and colors, 'draw' your hair on that. Once you have your Wizard's light hair spell finished, then you can cast it as many times as you want and wrap it around your wire frame sculpture. I don't know if it'll look right or not, but it's something that you can try." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Instead of 'making' actual hair, just do a drawing of hair?" Lucky asked to verify his understanding.

"Like I said, it's something to try. Even if it doesn't work, it might give you another idea of how you can accomplish the same thing." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. I'll try that." Lucky said determinedly before turning his full attention back to his work.

Paul smiled at the reaction, then returned to his familiars to see if they'd been able to make any progress.

* * * * *

"Paul, do you have a minute to look at this?" G asked hopefully.

"Yeah." Paul said as he got up from the collection of spell diagrams that were surrounding him.

"What's your first impression?" G asked as Paul approached.

"He looks great!" Paul said in astonishment.

"Did I get it right?"

"Yeah. I mean, you might want to work with his hair a little, it doesn't look *exactly* like yours. But other than that, he looks like you. Before he was like a creepy wrong version of you but now I look at him and it's almost like you're looking back at me."

"Thanks. When I'm looking at him, it's really hard for me to see what's wrong."

"He looks good." Paul said honestly.

"Wow! That really looks great!" Lucky said as he approached.

"Do you think he looks like me?" G asked cautiously.

"Yeah!" Lucky said excitedly, then quickly asked, "Can you show me how to do that?"

"Probably not." G said regretfully, then explained, "My specialty is Sorcery. You probably won't be able to use my spell unless your 'big magic' turns out to be Sorcery, too."

"If my 'big magic' is like my mama's, then I might be able to use it. She can take other people's magic away and use it like it's her own." Lucky said frankly.

"I didn't know that. I've never seen her use her magic." G said slowly, then thoughtfully added, "I guess it would make sense. Aunt Lyall is a magic drainer, so it would make sense that her daughter would be, too."

"So does that mean that Lucky could somehow become a summoner?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's not for sure that he'll get that kind of magic. He might follow after his grandfather, Uncle Tamhas, and do Basic magic and charms. But if he *does* get his mom's magic, then he could *possibly* hijack your magic and have access to your powers... but that doesn't mean that when he gets them that he'll know how to use them." G carefully explained.

"What about his dad? What kind of magic does he have?" Paul asked curiously.

"I don't have a dad." Lucky said quietly as he looked at the floor.

"I know how that is. I didn't have one either until last week when D said that he'd adopt me." Paul assured him, then continued, "I just asked because I thought it might also be possible that you'd get *his* magic."

Lucky shrugged and it was easy to see that he didn't want to talk about it.

Paul leaned down and gave the boy a quick, firm hug as he said, "I know what it's like, okay? I grew up without ever knowing anything about my father. If you ever need to talk to anyone about that, I think I can probably help you. I've been through it all."

Lucky didn't answer verbally, but returned Paul's hug enthusiastically.

A knock on the door interrupted their moment and G went to answer it.

* * * * *

"Dad? What are you doing out here?" G asked curiously.

"It seems that there's been a change in plans. Rather than call the three of you inside, I thought that I'd come out here to tell you about it." D explained.

"What's up?"

"Beth and Kyla have been brainstorming about the baby's room and I suggested that Kyla and the kids stay the weekend, not only so that they can enjoy the cookout with us, but also to allow Beth and Kyla more time to develop their ideas." D said seriously.

"That's great!" G said with a big smile.

"Is that okay with you?" Paul asked the younger boy at his side.

Lucky timidly nodded as he looked up at D.

"I was thinking that, if you two wouldn't mind, Lucky could stay out here with you tonight. After breakfast in the morning, he can help me with a few things while you two are at school." D said with a smile.

"Yeah! That sounds great!" G said happily.

Paul looked at Lucky with question and received another nod in return.

"I thought that you'd like that idea. I took the liberty of bringing Lucky's suitcase with me." D said as he picked up the suitcase from beside the door.

"Do you want to come in?" G asked quickly, only just realizing that he'd left his father standing on his doorstep.

"No. I need to get back inside. Apparently, there are a few thousand color swatches that I need to look at to give my 'male' opinion on." D said with a pained look.

"Have fun." G said as he fought to restrain a chuckle.

"You too." D said sincerely, then thought to add, "Don't stay up too late. It's a school night."

"Okay Dad." G said with an indulgent loving smile.

Seemingly on impulse, D stepped forward and pulled G into a quick hug and planted a kiss on his forehead.

Before G could react, D moved on to give hugs and kisses to Paul and Lucky as well.

G stood dumbfounded as he watched his father walk out of the room.

After a long silence, Paul finally said, "That was weird."

"Yeah. Dad's not usually like that." G said slowly.

"Well, at least it's weird in a good way." Paul said with a slight smile.

Lucky was standing stiffly and had tears in his eyes.

When Paul noticed, he quietly asked, "Are you okay?"

"Is that what it's like to have a dad?" Lucky whispered.

A few dozen responses crossed Paul's mind, but he finally answered, "Yeah."

"You're going to be here all weekend. Who knows? Maybe you'll get a few more of those." G interjected.

Lucky's amazed expression transformed into a smile at the thought.

"I wish that I could stay here with you and talk about that, but we still haven't figured out the problem with my spell." Paul said regretfully.

"What's wrong with it? Maybe we can help." G suggested easily.

In response, Paul made a sweeping gesture with one arm and a giant vertical spell diagram appeared in front of them.

"*This* is the problem." Paul said as the center of the diagram became misty, then resolved into an image of the three of them.

"So, were you *not* trying to make a mirror?" G guessed.

"No. Not really." Paul said frankly.

G realized that something was wrong with the image and looked over his shoulder curiously before looking back and cautiously saying, "You made a mirror that looks at our backs?"

"Yeah. Something like that." Paul said uneasily.

"How'd you do that?" G asked as he experimentally raised one hand and saw his image in 'the mirror' do the same.

"Actually, I'm still not sure about that. Mah Zah and Ginh Zah are working on it." Paul quietly admitted.

The three of them stood for a long moment before G finally said, "You were right about my butt."

"I know." Paul said with a smile.

* * * * *

The three went back to work on their individual projects.

G decided to devote some time to the detail work on Lex's hair.

Paul continued on with Mah Zah and Ginh Zah, trying to track down and fix the problem with the spell diagram.

Lucky quietly worked on his 'drawing' of fur, trying to get it to look as real as possible.

"That's it!" Paul announced as he walked over to G.

"What's what?" G asked as he was broken out of his concentration.

"We've figured out the problem with the oculus. It's going to take a little longer to cast than I was planning on, but I can make it work." Paul said triumphantly.

"Do you want to show me?" G asked with a smile.

"I can't yet. Mah Zah and Ginh Zah still have some other things to do, but at least we've got it all figured out. It'll all be ready in time for me to present it tomorrow." Paul said confidently.

"You don't want to do a test run first, just to be sure?" G asked cautiously.

"I already did. It's just that there's nothing to see yet." Paul said honestly, then continued, "Everything else is theatrics. The magic stuff is all settled."

"I'm sorry that I'm going to miss it." G said honestly.

"I'm sorry that I'm going to miss you unveiling Lex. I'd like to see everyone's reactions." Paul said honestly.

"There's probably not going to be much to it. The teacher will just call on us to make our self portraits for everyone to see. Hopefully, Lex will be one of the better ones, but I doubt that it'll be any big deal."

"How are you doing, Lucky?" Paul asked curiously.

"I need to work on it some more. It's not right yet." Lucky said honestly.

"Well, Paul and I are going to be at school, so you'll probably have time tomorrow, when Dad doesn't have you doing things for him." G said frankly.

"You can tell us all about it when we get home from school tomorrow." Paul said happily.

"Are you ready to put away the magic and relax for a little bit before we go to bed?" G asked his cousin with a smile.

"Yeah. I guess. What are we going to do?" Lucky asked curiously.

"We'll just relax and watch some anime until we fall asleep."

"What's anime?" Lucky asked curiously.

G broke into a glorious smile, then said, "You're going to *love* this!"

* * * * *

It seemed wrong to Paul to wake up alone.

Lucky and G were in the same room with him, but they had all slept separately.

Even so, Paul had no regrets. The three of them had all enjoyed the anime immensely.

Paul was surprised at just how good the animated movie had been.

The visuals were breathtaking, the action was exciting, the characters were well developed and the villain was even interesting. Rather than simply being 'evil', the antagonist was overwhelmed, immature and even a little bit sad. It added another dimension of complexity to the movie that Paul could sympathize and relate to the villain.

All in all, Paul had to admit that it was among the best movies that he had ever seen, animated or otherwise.

Of course it was Lucky's first anime, so his reaction was that much more intense.

The sound of the alarm going off forced Paul to stop lying around, pondering the night before.

"Lucky, it's time to get up." Paul said as he reluctantly forced himself into an upright sitting position.

"Did we all forget to go to bed last night?" Lucky asked in confusion as he looked around.

"No. This is where we always sleep." G answered quietly.

"That is *so* awesome!" Lucky exclaimed then hurriedly added, "Your life is the best."

"You're part of this too Lucky. Even if you don't live with us 'full-time', you're still one of the guys." Paul said frankly.

"That's right." G confirmed, then explained, "This doesn't have anything to do with you being family or anything like that. I don't know if you've noticed, but we have a certain energy going on here. When we get together, we make each other better than we really are. You're part of that now. You're one of us."

Paul was surprised by G's declaration, but couldn't find a single thing that he disagreed with about it.

"But for right now we need to get ready for breakfast." G said decisively as he got up from where he had been sleeping.

"Lucky, are you going to need to take anything from your suitcase into the house with you? G and I are probably going to be coming back here long enough to shower and change into our school clothes before we leave. You'll probably be staying in the house after breakfast." Paul asked seriously.

"I should probably take my suitcase with me so I can change into clean clothes. My mom will have a fit if I wear the same clothes that I wore yesterday." Lucky said honestly.

"Good thinking. It's best to keep the moms on our side as much as we can. If we piss them off, they won't let us do as much stuff." Paul said frankly.

"I wish I could go to school with you guys. It's going to be boring here without you." Lucky said quietly.

"Even if you went with us, you probably wouldn't see much of us anyway. G and I only have a few classes together. The only time we really get to see each other for more than a few minutes is at lunchtime." Paul said honestly.

"Besides, from what Dad was saying, he's going to have you helping him today. That might end up being fun. Give him a chance." G added as they walked out the front door.

* * * * *

"So, you were saying last night that you had some presentations to do. Can I assume that this has something to do with what you were working on with Nazareth and Revindra?" D asked curiously before taking a bite of his food.

"We have to present that today. But then we each have our own presentations to give in our specialty classes in the afternoon." G said frankly.

"So you each have *two* presentations to give today?" D asked to verify his understanding.

"Yeah. But I think we're ready." G said with an uncertain glance at Paul.

Paul nodded his assurance.

"What will you be presenting?" D asked curiously.

"I'm doing a self-portrait illusion. I know it sounds easy, but it was a lot harder than I expected it to be." G said frankly.

"Is it something that you can show us now? Or does it take too much time to prepare?" D slowly asked.

"I can do it now. It's the crafting that takes all the time. Once I've been able to get it all refined the way I want it, I can call it back up whenever I want to." G said simply, then looked to his side as Lex faded into being.

"That's some fantastic work!" Beth said in amazement.

"If I didn't know better, I couldn't tell that he wasn't a real person." Kyla said in wonder.

"What's more, it actually looks like you. I mean, I'm your father. If there's anyone in the world who should be able to find fault with it, it's me. But this is really flawless." D said in an impressed voice.

"You're going to do great at the presentation." Beth said confidently.

"Thanks." G said shyly.

"What about you, Paul? Can you show us what you'll be presenting?" Beth asked hopefully.

"I'm sorry, I can't. Mine takes a lot of preparation." Paul said apologetically.

"But you do everything with Wizard's lights and magical fire don't you?" G asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But that's not the problem." Paul told him, then explained, "I have everything arranged for this afternoon. I really can't do it before then."

"Even so, it sounds like you've gone to a lot of time and trouble to perfect your spell. I'm sure that it's going to impress the proper people." Beth said with a significant look at her son.

Paul wasn't used to seeing this side of his mother's personality. While it was a far cry from the beaten down weary woman that he had become accustomed to seeing, he couldn't be one hundred percent sure that this was an *improvement*.

"I think that since he's only known about magic for one week, that they should be impressed that he can summon *anything*." G said in Paul's defense.

"I certainly am." D interjected honestly.

Something about D's statement hit Paul a lot more strongly than it had any right to. Hearing D essentially say that he was *proud* made Paul want to break down into tears. He was able to tamp down his emotions in the nick of time, but it *was* a very near thing.

"We've got to get moving if we're going to be ready on time." G warned.

"Yeah." Paul acknowledged, then said to everyone, focusing mainly on D, "I'll tell you how it went at dinner tonight."

Paul felt a little twinge at leaving Lucky behind, but G was right. They had no time to dawdle. They had *exactly* enough time to shower and dress for school.

* * * * *

Despite knowing that he was as prepared as he could be, Paul still felt nervous about the upcoming presentations.

His ride in the school van, cuddled next to G, helped to soothe him and by the time they arrived, Paul was wearing a contented smile.

"I'm fine now. You don't have to go with me." Paul said when he noticed that G was walking with him down the hallway.

"Actually, I do." G said simply.

"I'll be okay. I promise."

"I believe you." G assured him, then added with a smile, "But we're going the same place. I'm in your Numerology class. Remember?"

"Oh. Yeah. I've had so many classes so far this week that I lost track. Sorry about that." Paul finished timidly.

G laughed good naturedly as he threw an arm around Paul and gave him a quick hug.

"I've been so caught up with the presentations... was there anything that I was supposed to have done for Numerology?" Paul asked hesitantly.

"No. We're just going through workbooks at our own pace." G assured him, then added as an aside, "But Ms. Ipsum asked you to tell her about what you've been able to do with Numerology spells besides plotting pi in your spell diagrams."

"That's right..." Paul began to say as they walked into the classroom with G's arm still around him.

* * * * *

Paul immediately went to the back of the room to the study table as G walked to the bookshelf to select a few workbooks for Paul to work on.

By the time the class bell rang, Paul and G were already doing their best to cover as much material as possible to get Paul caught up with the rest of the class.

"How are you gentlemen doing today?" Ms. Ipsum asked pleasantly as she approached.

"I think we're doing pretty well. Paul's been working his butt off impressing everyone." G said with a grin.

"I must admit that I've heard something about that in the teacher's lounge. It was a good feeling to be able to proclaim that some of the disciplines from my class were able to contribute to his achievements." Ms. Ipsum said with a smile.

"I've probably used what I've learned in your class more than anything except for maybe Wizardry." Paul said as he looked up from his book.

"Really? I wouldn't have expected that." Ms. Ipsum said honestly.

"Look." Paul said, then indicated a spot beside them as a round stone column emerged from the floor and stopped at about table level.

"That's... surprising." Ms. Ipsum said uncertainly.

"Yeah, that's adapted from the 3D plotting spell from the workbook." Paul explained.

G walked over and patted the top of the column as he said, "And it's solid."

"Remarkable." Ms. Ipsum whispered.

"Yeah. Well, I already showed you the spell diagram using the pi plot." Paul said as he gestured to the top of the column again and a glowing spell diagram appeared.

"The other thing that I've used over and over again is the writing spell that's embedded in the workbook. I know it's not *exactly* a Numerology spell, but I learned it in here, so I figure that it counts." Paul said as the text of a spell began to fill itself into the different segments of his spell diagram.

"What you've accomplished is amazing. I'm going to get out of your way now so that you can learn even more valuable spells and concepts." Ms. Ipsum said as she continued to stare at what Paul had created.

"Thanks for letting me get caught up at my own pace and for letting G help me. If I was in anyone else's class I'd probably be sitting and struggling with a textbook trying to make sense of stuff that I wasn't interested in learning." Paul said sincerely.

"Just let me know if you need anything." Ms. Ipsum said quietly before going back to the front of the room to attend to the rest of the class.

* * * * *

"Hey Vinda. How are things going today?" Paul asked as he walked into the classroom.

"Everything's fine so far. I've overheard a few people talking about what happened yesterday, but so far all of them have said that attacking you was wrong and that Kristie and Carla got what was coming to them." Vinda said frankly.

'*What was it that I did to piss them off?*'

'*Oh yeah. I refused to play nice with Carla when she demanded it.*'

"Well, I guess as long as people aren't talking about hunting me down and beating me up, that I should be thankful." Paul said honestly.

"I think that anyone who might normally make a move against you is probably scared of what you'll do to them." Vinda said with an apologetic smile.

"Having people afraid of me makes me feel like I'm some kind of a monster."

"Toughen up, Buttercup." Vinda said simply, then added, "You're a witch. You'd better get used to it."

Paul couldn't tell from her expression if she were joking or not. Either way, he wasn't laughing.

"Some people are in denial about the whole thing. I try not to judge them too harshly for it. We all do what we have to do to deal with our own situations."

"But I'm a demon summoner. That's kinda huge on the monster scale. What do *you* have to deal with?" Paul asked seriously.

"I summon departed human souls and command them to do my bidding. I mean, yeah, you do the same thing with demons, but if you really think about it, what I do could be considered to be a whole lot more evil than what you do... or even what Nazzy does. He just reanimates the meat. It isn't good for anything but worm food anyway. By some ways of thinking, what I do actually desecrates the eternal essence of a human soul."

Paul remembered his initial shock when he realized what it was that Nazzy and Vinda did with their magic. After a moment of soul searching, he could honestly say that it didn't bother him.

"Okay. You're more evil than I am." Paul finally relented, then thought to add, "But you're still my friend."

"Welcome to the dark side. We have cookies." Vinda said with a grin.

Paul couldn't restrain his laughter at the reference to the tired meme.

"We'd better get to work. Class is about to start." Vinda said with a smile.

Paul nodded, then went to the study table at the back of the room to resume his read-through of the introductory Alchemy book.

* * * * *

Paul was once again enthralled by the Alchemy text. Not only did it make perfect sense to him, but it was almost as though he could read *between* the lines.

There were glimpses of dangerous and powerful things that were just out of his reach, hidden in plain sight within descriptions of bland magical 'experiments'.

"Mr. Darroch, I hope this day finds you well." Mr. Hind said from behind Paul, causing him to startle.

'*He does that on purpose, sneaking up behind people.*'

'*I kinda gotta respect that.*'

'*I mean, an Alchemy teacher with Ninja skills... there's **got to** be an anime about that.*'

"Yes. I'm very well, Mr. Hind. Thank you for suggesting this book. I'm really getting a lot out of it." Paul said honestly.

"I'm pleased to hear that. Students tend to be less interested in the subjects that are taught more in theory than in practice. It's refreshing to see someone who can appreciate the art behind the magic."

"Yeah. Since I'm so interested in altering the states of matter, it's easy to get lost in it."

"Yes. I've always thought so." Mr. Hind admitted with a seemingly sincere smile.

"There was one thing that I was wanting to ask about that they haven't covered in the book yet."

"What might that be?" Mr. Hind asked curiously.

"Well, in the theoretical scenarios in the book they talk about altering the states of matter when you need to, but the reasons they use always make it so that the changes are temporary. Changing earth to have the properties of water so you can get something from underground without having to dig and things like that."

"Yes."

"So, what about when you want to change something permanently? Is there a whole other course of study for that or what? So far, I haven't seen anything that even hints at if it's possible." Paul said seriously.

"As you said, these scenarios are theoretical. It could likely be *years* before you'll have occasion to actually *cast* an alchemy spell. The fact of the matter is, most students will *never* advance to that stage. Only those who have both an interest and a talent for Alchemy will progress to the point where more advanced spells are introduced."

"Is that because the spells are so powerful? You want to be sure that someone is really committed to the art before you give them access to the dangerous stuff?" Paul asked speculatively, probing for information.

"We typically do not speak of such things. In my class you will learn the foundations of Alchemy, then you will advance to the spells involving physical transformations of yourself and the manipulation of base objects." Mr. Hind said slowly.

'*Ding! Ding! Ding!*'

'*We have a winner!*'

'*The things we do not speak about are the things worth knowing.*'

'*Now let's see if we can get Mr. Hind to fess up about what's being hidden.*'

"Those sound like some nice tricks. It'd probably be enough to keep someone who wasn't really interested in Alchemy entertained for a while." Paul said speculatively, then looked Mr. Hind in the eyes as he asked, "But what happens to someone who wants to see it all? What if I want to look behind the curtain and find out about the *real* Alchemy? What's going to happen to me then?"

"There are more advanced courses taught at the college level for those who exhibit an interest in specializing their field of study." Mr. Hind said carefully.

"Uh huh." Paul said, then stood from his chair.

Thanks to his preparation for the presentation in Spelling class, Paul had been able to refine the spell for the base of the pillar into its most fundamental form. He calmly and carefully went through the incantation aloud as he expertly performed each of the required hand gestures.

Mr. Hind's expression went from interest to concern as he began to get an inkling of what Paul's spell was meant to do.

"No. You can't..." Mr. Hind began to say just as the pillar began to emerge from the floor.

Once Paul's spellcasting was finished, he placed one hand on the smooth solid surface of the pillar before him.

Other students around the classroom were looking in his direction, but no one got out of their seats to investigate.

Vinda was watching with interest from relatively nearby and seemed to be on the verge of joining their conversation. If she did, Paul couldn't begin to guess if she'd be on his side or Mr. Hind's.

"What I'm asking is, if I stay in this class, will I learn how to do something more than I've already figured out on my own?" Paul asked carefully.

Mr. Hind cautiously stepped forward and tentatively touched the surface of the solid stone pillar that hadn't been there a moment before.

Paul watched and waited for his answer.

"You learned to do this from the basic material that I provided you?" Mr. Hind asked cautiously.

"I used the theories and descriptions of how Alchemy works at the most fundamental level and incorporated that into other spells that I was already working on. If you'll check out the book, you'll see that they're really careful not to give any

actual Alchemy spells. That's okay. It's dangerous. I get that. But what I want to know is if I want to *really* learn Alchemy, is there any point to me even being here?"

"I don't have the authority to do what I believe that you are asking of me." Mr. Hind said slowly.

"All I'm asking of you right now is to tell me the truth. Is there any point to me staying in this class and learning how to do 'tricks' that use Alchemy without ever learning how Alchemy actually works?"

"What would you do with the knowledge if you had access to it?" Mr. Hind asked cautiously.

"Sorry, I've only had one Augury class so far, so I can't really tell the future. All I can tell you is that I'm interested in what you have to teach me... *if* you'll teach it to me."

"Were I to give you an answer now, I'm afraid it might prompt you to take an action that both of us would later regret. Will you allow me the time to discuss the matter with a few people and do a little investigation before I give you a final response?" Mr. Hind asked slowly.

"Yes. As long as I know that you're at least considering it, I can wait." Paul said in the tone of a vow.

"Although I understand that you can't predict the future, I'm still interested to know what drives you to want this knowledge?" Mr. Hind asked curiously.

Paul grinned at the question, then said, "From the feel of the magic, I think I could be good at Alchemy. If I get the right training and access to some *real* Alchemy books, I might even become *great* at it. I don't know what jobs there are for a 'great' alchemist, but how many chances does a person have to be 'great' at anything?"

"But your specialty is Wizardry, is it not?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem?"

"It doesn't disqualify you from anything, but what happens if you have to make a choice? Will you abandon your interest in Alchemy when the demands of your studies in Wizardry become too great?"

"If I have to choose, I'll choose. It's impossible for me to tell you now which one will be more important to me that far in the future." Paul said honestly, then thought to add, "But I'm going to do my best to do both. Just because I'm doing something in Wizardry doesn't mean that I can't toss some Alchemy in there too."

"Allow me to make some inquiries. I'll get back with you as soon as I have some options for you to consider." Mr. Hind said seriously.

"Thank you Mr. Hind. I'm sorry if I got pushy, but I thought it might be the only way that you'd understand how much I really want to learn about Alchemy. I could have sat down and shut up and played along with the rest of the class while you taught them how to turn each other into toads but by then I might have lost the will to even *try* learning anything more."

"That's quite alright. Although I'm not accustomed to students demanding to be taught more advanced material, I can't say that I'm offended by it." Mr. Hind said sincerely, then added as an aside, "In regard to the toads, we only change ourselves, not each other."

"I stand corrected." Paul said with a grin.

"I need to get back to the rest of the class. I'm relatively certain that they're more focused on us than what they were individually studying." Mr. Hind said honestly.

"I'm sorry for disrupting your class. I'll try not to let it happen again." Paul said repentantly.

"Don't concern yourself. Such a worthy demand was deserving of a certain amount of disruption to emphasize its importance. Now I will leave you to your reading." Mr. Hind said before walking away.

* * * * *

"What the HELL?!" Vinda asked as she caught up to Paul outside the Alchemy classroom.

"I didn't want to learn baby magic." Paul said simply.

"What do you mean 'baby magic'? That's the same class that *everyone* takes."

"If you don't have any interest in learning more than what Mr. Hind is teaching you now, that's fine. I guess that his class is *exactly* what most witches our age need to learn. There's nothing too dangerous but there's also enough of the basic theory so that you can understand how things work." Paul carefully explained.

"But you want to know more?" Vinda asked cautiously.

"Yeah."

"That's it? Yeah? That's the only explanation you're going to give for standing up to one of the teachers?!"

"Yeah." Paul said with a grin.

Vinda threw up her arms, then spotted Nazzy and G approaching.

"What's wrong?" Nazzy asked with concern, immediately sensing Vinda's frustration.

"G, why don't you ask your *boyfriend* what he did in Mr. Hind's class today?" Vinda asked forcefully.

"What did you do in Mr. Hind's class today, Paul?" G asked indulgently.

"I read a book." Paul answered with a grin.

"Was it a good book?"

"Pretty good. Not enough pictures."

"He created a stone pillar in the middle of Alchemy class and demanded that Mr. Hind teach him stuff that he's not teaching everyone else." Vinda said in frustration.

"Was that before or after reading the book?" G asked Paul warmly.

"Kind of in the middle. Mr. Hind interrupted me." Paul said with a smile that he couldn't contain.

"Paul threatened to quit Alchemy class over it!" Vinda yelled.

"Because he interrupted your reading?" G asked with a wide-eyed look.

"No. Because of the 'not teaching' thing." Paul said warmly, loving G even more in that moment.

"Oh." G said with a nod.

Vinda looked back and forth between them and didn't know who she was angrier at.

"Are we ready for our presentation?" Nazzy quietly asked.

Vinda's death glare directed at him let him know that she wasn't *quite* done with the previous conversation.

"I asked Mr. Hind if I could study more advanced Alchemy material and he's going to look into it." Paul quietly explained.

"I never really got into Alchemy, but if you're interested in it, you should learn more about it." G said frankly.

Vinda threw up her hands again and shook her head in disgust.

"Seriously, guys. Are we ready for the presentation?" Nazzy asked nervously.

"Yeah. I got mine. No problem." G said confidently.

"I'm good." Paul said simply.

"Vin, are you up to it? If you're too pissed off, you could trash the spell for all of us." Nazzy warned her.

"Paul, I'm worried about you... or because of you... something like that. What you just did... people don't do that. You don't just go up to a teacher and tell them that you want more work that's harder or you're going to quit their class. I don't want you to quit... or to get kicked out." Vinda fought to explain.

"I'm sorry, Vinda. I guess I'm not used to having people around me who care about me, so I'm not used to taking anyone else's feelings into account before I act. I really didn't mean to worry you." Paul said quietly.

'*The whole thing with G, that's personal. It's on a whole different level.*'

'*But having Nazzy and Vinda as my friends... that's totally new.*'

'*Hopping from school to school, I learned not to connect with people.*'

'*Having friends sounds so easy. So normal. Everyone does it.*'

'*I guess it's finally time for me to learn how it's done.*'

'*I can't wait.*'

Vinda slowly nodded, then said, "Okay. I'm ready to do the spell now."

Paul looked to G and Nazzy to find them in agreement.

* * * * *

As the foursome walked into the classroom, they continued on to their customary work area.

A few minutes after the bell rang, Mrs. Herdez approached the group and asked, "Are you ready for your group presentation?"

"Yes. Just let us know when you're ready for us to start." Vinda said for the group.

"Everyone, please gather around. We're going to have a presentation today that might well take the entire class period, so we need to get started."

Paul noticed that Nicholas was present, but since he was at the back of the small crowd of students, Paul decided to leave him alone.

"Whenever you're..." Mrs. Herdez began to say, but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Just a moment." She said as she hurried to answer it.

After some brief discussion at the door, Mrs. Herdez ushered Karras into the room and said, "You may begin whenever you're ready."

Vinda looked around at the group and they moved slightly to allow enough room for their pillar to manifest.

Once she was sure that everyone was in place, Vinda began her spellcasting. From the first few phrases that she used, it was obvious to all present that she was casting something to do with Numerology.

Nazzy began casting next and the other members of their class were perplexed by the fact that Nazzy wasn't casting the exact same spell as Vinda. His spell was related to a Basic Magic spell and several in attendance recognized it as being a variation of the Wizard's light.

When G started casting an entirely different spell, obviously based in a discipline of magic that was completely foreign to most of the class, the looks of puzzlement began to transform into looks of anticipation.

Paul listened carefully to what everyone else was doing and when just the right moment came, he jumped in with his spellcasting. None present were familiar with the casting of an Alchemy spell, so they didn't know *exactly* what Paul was trying to cause to happen.

The four of them continued on and on, each performing their different incantations and hand signs.

For those who were paying close enough attention and had a working knowledge of the magical importance of the gestures, there was the added bonus of being able to catch the same coordinates being referenced in all four spells.

When the stone pillar erupted from the floor, there were some gasps from the spectators and a few people reflexively stepped back.

There were also some whispers from those who had seen Paul create the stone pillar before in other classes.

But what none of them had previously seen was the fully manifested scene atop the pillar complete with its illusionary improvements.

The castle, forest and lake were idyllic. And, as planned, the frolicking hedgehogs brought a sense of life to the entire scene.

"This is far beyond anything that I had anticipated." Mrs. Herdez said in amazement as she approached.

"Just make sure you touch it. For someone like me, who's in Sorcery, making something beautiful isn't really that big of a deal. But making something that's *real*. That's special." G said frankly.

"It really is incredible. Why don't you explain to the class just what components the four of you put together to create this masterpiece?" Mrs. Herdez asked hopefully.

The three boys seemed to be looking to Vinda to be their spokesman, but she only did so inasmuch as she said, "Paul was the one who came up with the original spells and the idea to put them together like this. We all modified them since, but the initial idea was his, so he should explain them."

"Thanks." Paul said to her sharply, then looked around the class and said, "The base of all of this is the 3D plotter spell from the Numerology workbook. I rejiggered the spell a little and made it so that it could plot all of this. That's the frame that everything else is hanging on. Vinda cast that part of the spell."

A few surprised looks went around the room, but no one seemed to be able to come up with a question.

"Once the plotter was initialized, the Wizard's lights were used to fill in where the plotter wanted to plot. Vinda made the frame and Nazzy put all the colored panels in place on it.

"The next thing was to use some of the principles of Alchemy to make the different panels solid... or liquid, depending on what they were representing. That way you can touch it or even stand on it, if you want to. They're also opaque, so they give depth to the whole thing, making it look more *real*. I did that part.

"After all the rest was done, G created an illusion to slide over the whole thing like a glove. That smoothed out all the corners and made everything look a lot more natural." Paul said carefully.

"But how were you able to coordinate it so that all four of you could cast your spells at the same time without stepping on each other and fritzing out each other's magic?" One of the girls in the class asked curiously.

Nazzy and Vinda exchanged a look, but seemed to be as unsure as the girl who had asked the question.

"I did that. Nobody told me that I couldn't do multiple spells at once, so the first time I made this thing, I just did it. When I found out that the four of us needed to do the different spells at the same time, I just looked back at how I did them all at once on my own and did my best to make it so that they'd still connect to each other in the same way when we did them together." Paul said with difficulty.

"I don't get how you created something so complex with such a little spell. If I tried to make something this complicated, I'd probably still be casting the spell this time next week." A boy said cautiously.

"That has a lot to do with the Numerology lessons. I was able to use some of the magical formula manipulation spells to serve as containers for the different elements of the construct. So instead of having to draw one tree, then draw

another, I just created a manipulation, made it randomize a little and called it 'tree', then I had the inner spell dynamic, which was woven into the outer spell, cast it as many times as it needed to, to create the forest. I had another dynamic like that for the castle, the field and the lake."

There was a long moment of silence, then Paul barely heard someone whisper, "That made my brain hurt."

Paul smiled despite himself, then looked around to see if anyone else had any questions.

"Is this the same kind of thing that you made in Gym class the other day?" A boy asked seriously.

Paul turned to see who had asked the question and recognized him.

"Yeah Zanner. If you look at the stone of this pillar, you'll see that it's exactly the same as my walls." Paul confirmed.

"What's it like to cast a spell together like that?" A girl asked curiously.

Paul was happy to notice that their classmates seemed to be getting more comfortable talking to him.

"I'm new here, so this is all I've ever known. I'm not the best one to ask." Paul said honestly, then turned to his teammates and asked, "Guys?"

"Um, I guess it's like it adds a whole new level of difficulty because you don't just have to worry about doing your part but you have to be aware of what everyone else is doing at the same time." Nazzy said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. And you aren't just putting your own grade on the line. Any one of us could have screwed this up for all of us." G added frankly.

"But couldn't you make something just like that with your sorcery? You could have done this whole project by yourself and it wouldn't have been any different." Another boy in the class challenged.

"If I made it, it wouldn't be real. Your hand would pass through it. The stone wouldn't be sharp, the water wouldn't be wet, and the leaves on the trees wouldn't be soft. Besides that, I can't incorporate that much fine detail into my illusions. I can do something like this and make an overlay that blends and smooths, but if I were trying to make the entire thing myself, it wouldn't be nearly this nice. It's just way too complicated for me to construct." G finished with a shrug.

"What about you, Paul? You did this whole thing by yourself the other day. You don't need anyone else's help, do you?" The same boy asked seriously.

"I can't do the Sorcery. I'll tell you that upfront." Paul said firmly, then added a little more quietly, "As far as the rest, yeah, I can cast the spells myself, all at the same time. But it's nowhere near as good as all of us casting the spells together."

"Why not?" The boy asked suspiciously.

"Watch carefully." Paul said with a grin, then turned to G and said, "Let's tear it down."

G slowly raised his hands in the direction of the pillar, then suddenly dropped them. As he did, the illusion fell away from the construct, revealing the colorful pixelated structure before them.

There was silence throughout the room as everyone watched intently, not wanting to miss a moment of the spectacle.

Paul held one hand out toward the pillar with his palm open toward it. He held it there for a moment, for dramatic effect, then slowly closed his fist as he pulled his hand away. As he did that, the entire pillar became a colorful arrangement of transparent cubes.

He heard a few gasps and had to admit that the sight of it *was* somewhat breathtaking.

Nazzy made a grand counterclockwise gesture in the air with one hand and all the color drained from the structure.

Paul couldn't help but smile at the grand expression of Nazzy's intent.

The room was silent as Vinda slowly raised her hand toward the delicate looking crystalline sculpture and firmly said, "Be gone."

When she said that, all the little glass or ice crystals making up the pillar seemed to shatter in a cascading effect from top to bottom.

There was a long silent moment that followed, then Paul was aware of someone clapping. He turned to see that it was Karras, who was now leading their classmates in applause.

* * * * *

When the applause died down, Mrs. Herdez approached the group and asked, "Did you happen to write the spells down for me?"

"Yeah. I've got it right here. Just a second." Vinda said quickly, then hurried to get the spiral bound notebook out of her backpack.

"That was an excellent display of multidisciplinary spellcasting, which far exceeded my expectations. Not only did you perform the spells with practiced precision, but you also augmented the spellcasting with your own individual examples of flair. All

of you, please remember what you did here today, because when you have an opportunity to demonstrate your magic in the future, this will be a fine example for you to follow."

"I was afraid that you might not want us doing the extras at the end, since it wasn't really part of the spellcasting." Nazzy admitted timidly.

"To be honest, I absolutely detest it when the 'performance' of a spell overshadows the casting of it. But what the four of you did was just the right balance to demonstrate the spell as well as to make the presentation interesting. It's what makes the difference between a 'competent' spell and a 'memorable' one."

When Mrs. Herdez had finished speaking, Vinda presented her with the spiral bound notebook.

"Do you mind if I keep this for a bit? I'd like to submit it to Professor Bielecki for his evaluation." Mrs. Herdez asked hopefully.

"Who's Professor Bielecki?" Paul asked cautiously.

"He's the head of this department, just like Professor Ortega is the head of Wizardry." Nazzy quietly explained.

"This has all the notes for our project. Keep it as long as you need to." Vinda said for all of them.

Mrs. Herdez opened the notebook and leafed through a few pages before saying, "This is very neat and well organized. I only wish that my other students could be bothered to do as much."

'*Better watch out Ginh Zah.*'

'*You might have some competition for who's the cattiest cat in town.*'

"Would you mind if we talked to Karras for a few minutes? He came here from another class so that he could see our presentation." G asked hopefully.

"Yes. Of course. You've all done very well." Mrs. Herdez said sincerely.

"Thanks!" G said happily, then dashed away from the group to where Karras was standing and watching them.

"You realize that by doing this that we've just set the bar really *really* high for ourselves?" Nazzy asked Paul warily.

"Yeah. Sorry. I do that a lot." Paul quietly admitted.

* * * * *

As Paul walked into his next classroom he didn't know what to expect.

Nazzy, Vinda and G had all gone off to other classes and for the first time that day he was entirely on his own.

"My name is Paul Darroch. I've been assigned to this class." Paul said as he approached the desk at the front of the room.

"You know, in the *non*-magic part of the school, they make students wait until the new school year before they enroll them."

"Yes ma'am. I know. I originally enrolled as a non-magical student." Paul said quietly as she seemed to be concentrating on writing something.

"Oh? Darroch! Of course. I've heard some of the other teachers talking about you in the lounge."

"Nice things, I hope." Paul said cautiously.

"Yes. All good. I promise." She said as she looked up from her book and smiled. "Now then, I'm Mrs. Gibbner and this is Civics class. Basically, in this class we'll discuss the moral obligations of witches to not only the witch community, but also to the greater mundane community. In doing so, I'll teach you about your rights and responsibilities not only as a witch, but also as a citizen. You're starting out a few weeks behind and there's a LOT to learn. I'm going to be counting on you to do your part to catch up."

"Yes ma'am." Paul said quietly.

She handed him a textbook then said, "Skip to chapter two and see how far you can get. Don't be tempted to skim and scan. Try to remember, *all* of this is important."

"Except for chapter one." Paul said before he could think better of it.

"Yes." Mrs. Gibbner said with a hint of a smile, then glanced around before whispering, "Chapter one is a bunch of flowery motivational crap."

Paul smiled and nodded.

"Take a seat. We need to get started." Mrs. Gibbner said firmly.

"Yes ma'am." Paul said then looked back at the classroom to find an available seat.

Chapter 13

Paul's head was swimming with all the facts that he had been trying to learn. Mrs. Gibbner had been right about not skimming and scanning. The writing was so condensed that nearly every sentence contained important facts that he would need to know, if not on a test, then at some point later in his life.

"Paul." A voice said timidly as he stepped into the hallway.

He was still a bit dazed and he looked around before spotting who had spoken to him.

"Oh. Hi Dex. How are you doing?" Paul asked with a smile.

"Fine." Dex muttered, then quietly asked, "Can I talk to you about something?"

"Is it something that we can talk about in the lunchroom?" Paul asked cautiously, suspecting that he already knew the answer.

"No. It's private." Dex said nervously.

"Okay. No one's paying attention to us now. You can tell me while we're walking." Paul said simply.

Dex seemed to consider that for a moment as he looked around, then quietly said, "I don't want anyone to overhear."

Paul looked around and was happy to see a conveniently placed secluded area in a side hallway.

Once they were well away from anyone else, Dex quietly asked, "Were you serious about there being no magic at your cookout tomorrow?"

"Yeah." Paul said slowly, still not getting a sense of what Dex's problem was.

"No one's going to be talking about magic either?" Dex asked to confirm.

"That's the plan. Since Curtis and his family will be there, we'll just stay off the subject." Paul said simply.

"My dad, he's... not a witch." Dex muttered as he looked away and refused to meet Paul's eyes.

"Neither is mine. What's the problem?" Paul asked simply.

"It causes a lot of trouble at home. I think Mom feels isolated from the witch community and Dad feels like he can't have any regular friends because he has to keep the secret. I thought that your cookout might be a good thing for both of them, where they can both be around people and be able to do something together in public."

"What about you? Do *you* want to come to the cookout?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's all the same to me. I don't fit in anywhere. I'm different from everyone else." Dex said quietly.

"So am I." Paul said simply.

"But you can do magic. I'm not a witch... not completely... just enough so that I can't fit in with regular people." Dex said miserably.

"I don't mean to be insensitive, but all of this is new to me. Up until last week, I thought that I was just a regular person. So I don't know about a lot of this stuff. I know that I'm a Cambion, but are you something different?"

"A Cambion? Your father's a demon?"

"Yeah."

"Mine's a human, so that makes me a Warlock."

"I've heard that word before but I thought that it meant something different, like a 'male witch'." Paul said honestly.

"What it actually means is a half-human half-witch. But since I have an elemental affinity, I'm *technically* considered to be an Oriad, but almost no one knows what that is."

"Okay. I don't know what that is either, but for this weekend, it doesn't matter." Paul said frankly.

"The reason I wanted to talk to you was to be sure that it'd be okay for my parents. I wouldn't want to take them there and then find out that one or the other of them are going to be left out or made to feel ashamed." Dex said quietly.

"Well, I can't promise anything, but I hope that they'll have a good time... I hope that *you'll* have a good time. I think it'll be good for you to be able to spend some time with witches and non-witches and not worry about things for a while."

"That *does* sound nice." Dex admitted.

"Then let's go have lunch. Having Curtis there will make it so that we won't be talking about anything that will bother you." Paul said simply.

* * * * *

"Did you do something?" Curtis asked as he met up with Paul and the group, including Dex, outside the lunchroom.

"I've done lots of things. You'll need to be a little bit more specific."

"Today when the guys started picking on me and calling me names, the teacher gave them one warning and when they didn't stop, he sent them to the office and they didn't come back."

"Why do you think that it has anything to do with me?"

"The timing. Before, everyone seemed to just look at it as guys being rowdy and messing around. Now it's being taken seriously. Did you do something?"

"Yeah. I guess so. I mean, I got called to the office yesterday and I told Mrs. Bright that I was worried that someone might try to get back at me by hurting you, since you're my friend."

"Yeah. That would do it."

"I'm sorry if I made things worse for you. We were talking and she asked me and I guess I wasn't thinking."

"No. It's fine, really. After all those guys have put me through, I don't care if they get suspended or even expelled. I just wanted to know *why* it was happening all of a sudden."

"I'm glad that you're not mad. Are you still planning to come over for the cookout tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I talked to my parents and I think they're more excited about it than I am. I guess that I've been kinda wrapped up in myself and never really noticed that they haven't gone anywhere or done anything since we moved here. They don't know anyone except the people that they work with and haven't had a chance to make new friends."

"D lives here, so he doesn't have that problem, but it's the same for my mom. I hope that it'll turn out to be something good for all of them, but once we've gotten them together, the best thing for us to do will probably be to get out of their way and let them talk about parent stuff. If we're there, they'll probably focus on us and not get to know each other." Paul said honestly, then noticed that the rest of the group were standing with them outside the lunchroom.

"That sounds good to me." Curtis said thoughtfully.

"Let's go get something to eat. Whatever they're having smells wonderful." Paul said to his companions.

"Lasagne!" Nazzy happily announced as he led the way.

Paul felt G's arm go around him as they took their places in the cafeteria line.

* * * * *

Once the group had made their selections and were settled in at 'their' table, Nazzy quietly said, "Carla isn't in school today."

"Good." Paul responded simply.

"Have you heard anything about what's going on?" Nazzy persisted.

"Nope." Paul said before taking another bite of his food.

Nazzy looked around the table to see if anyone had any gossip to share on the subject, but came up empty.

"What do you have going on this afternoon, Curtis?" Vinda asked, obviously wanting to change the subject.

"I'm going to court."

"What for?" Vinda asked with concern.

"Just to watch. A group of us were selected to attend actual court proceedings so that we can understand how things really work."

"That's great! This way if you ever have to go to court for something, you'll have some idea of what you'll be walking into." Vinda said in an impressed voice.

"From what I've heard from other groups that have gone, usually not much happens. But I'm glad that I'm going anyway." Curtis said honestly.

"What class is that for?"

"Adulting 101." Curtis said with a grin, then admitted, "Actually, I think it's really called 'Life Skills' or something like that, but no one ever calls it that. Next week we're supposed to start working on budgeting. We're going to see if we can find a way to provide for a family of four on a teacher's salary."

"You'll have to let us know how that turns out. It sounds really interesting." Paul said frankly.

"Don't you guys have any classes like that?" Curtis asked curiously.

"I still haven't been to all my classes yet, but I haven't had any so far." Paul said honestly.

"I think we're slotted for something like 'Life Skills' next year, at least from what I've heard from some of the juniors running around." Vinda said uncertainly.

"I hope so. It sounds like a class that I could really use." Paul said simply.

"I think you have a lot of other things to get caught up on before you'll be ready for 'Life Skills'. Before you start working on a budget, you need to know how to make the math work." G interjected.

"From the way things have been going so far this week, I think that I might be able to get caught up." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. I think so too." G said with a loving smile at him.

"So, does anyone else have anything exciting going on this afternoon?" Curtis asked curiously.

"I know that Paul and I have presentations to give. I don't know about anyone else." G said as he looked inquiringly around the table.

"Yeah. I'll probably do one. I can't let Paul have all the fun." Vinda said grudgingly.

"Me too." Nazzy added simply.

Karras nodded.

"What kind of presentations?" Curtis asked curiously.

"Mine's an art project, but it's nothing special. The whole class was given the same assignment and everyone will be showing off their work today." G said simply.

"I can't really talk about mine. I want it to be a surprise." Paul said with a grin at his three Wizardry classmates.

"Well, if Paul's not telling, neither am I." Nazzy said defiantly.

Vinda and Karras seemed to agree with Nazzy's statement.

"What about you, Dex?" Curtis asked curiously.

"I don't have a presentation today. Just regular classes." Dex answered quietly.

Paul was proud on Dex's behalf that he had been willing and able to participate in even that much of their group conversation.

"It's almost time. You'll have to let me know how things went, tomorrow at the cookout." Curtis said as he glanced at the clock, then thought to ask, "You're all still coming, aren't you?"

Most of those in attendance either nodded or otherwise answered in the affirmative.

"It'll be weird to see everyone in something besides the school uniforms." Curtis said honestly.

"I hadn't thought about that." Paul said with surprise, then continued, "That *will* be weird."

"Come on. We don't want to wait till the bell rings and be rushed." Nazzy said unenthusiastically.

"I'll see you all tomorrow." Curtis said happily as he carried his tray away from the table.

The others lagged behind slightly and walked as a group to the 'hidden' hallway.

* * * * *

"I hope everything goes well for your presentation. I want to hear all about it later." G said as he held Paul close to his side while they walked.

"I'm pretty sure that if I miss telling you anything, *someone* will fill you in." Paul said with a grin as he looked at Nazzy, Vinda and Karras walking ahead of them.

"I'd rather hear it from you. Nothing makes me happy in the same way as you being happy because you've accomplished something. It makes my world light up." G said quietly.

"I'm going to want to hear about how things go with Lex too. I'm betting that he's probably going to be the best 'self-portrait' in the class." Paul said honestly.

"I'll tell you all about it tonight." G assured him, then leaned in to steal a quick kiss before breaking away to go to his own class.

Karras let his steps lag until he fell into step beside Paul. "You guys make it look so easy."

"What's that?" Paul asked curiously.

"All of it. Being gay. Being in love. Being teenage witches in a world that would hate us if it knew about us." Karras said frankly.

"I found the right person. The rest kinda just took care of itself." Paul said simply.

"That's it?" Karras asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah. That's it." Paul said with a grin.

Nothing more was said as the group walked into the Wizardry classroom.

* * * * *

"How does this work? Do we stand with our groups or what?" Paul asked curiously.

"We usually do, but I don't think that it's a rule or anything. Those are the people we work with every day so it just seems natural to stand with them in a group meeting." Vinda said thoughtfully.

"Okay. I'll be over with Nicholas and Amelia." Paul said none too enthusiastically.

* * * * *

"So, are you guys going to be presenting anything today?" Paul asked curiously.

"Nomia told me that you were working on something with Mah Zah and Ginh Zah to present today, so I decided that I'm going to wait until next week to do mine." Amelia said frankly.

"I'm sorry if you feel like I'm upstaging you. I really don't mean to, I just want to do my best." Paul said honestly.

"It's alright. If everything goes the way I'm hoping, I'll be able to show a lot more next week anyway." Amelia said seriously.

Paul slightly nodded in acknowledgement.

"Paul, can you look at something for me?" Nicholas asked cautiously, and seemed to be braced for Paul's refusal.

"Sure. What?" Paul asked curiously.

Nicholas went through the long-form version of the gestures to create a Wizard's light diagram, but thankfully did the spoken incantation internally.

Paul watched carefully, and although some of Nicholas' individual gestures were crude in their form, overall they appeared to be adequate.

When Nicholas finally released the magic, Frederick's spell diagram appeared on the floor before them.

"Nice work." Paul said sincerely.

"Yeah. But is it right? Did I miss anything?" Nicholas asked cautiously.

Paul looked more closely at the details of the spell diagram and could detect a few minor variations from his own version of the same diagram. He calculated the permutations of the variations as quickly as he could and came to the conclusion that the differences weren't significant enough to disrupt the overall spell.

It was crude, and because of that, it would take a bit more magic than necessary to cast, but if Nicholas could manage to muscle through it, then the resulting summoning should work.

"Yeah. It looks good." Paul finally said.

"I didn't think I'd be able to get it ready in time." Nicholas admitted.

"But you did." Paul said with a smile.

"Yeah." Nicholas said as he looked down at the spell diagram again.

"If you'll excuse me, I need to do one last thing to prepare for my presentation." Paul said as he brought up one hand before him just below eye level.

Amelia and Nicholas watched as a vortex opened and a kitten emerged, stepping directly into Paul's open palm.

"The class is just about to start, so you two can get it going whenever you want." Paul said seriously.

The kitten 'meowed' loudly one time, then turned and went back through the vortex hanging in the air.

"You can summon your familiars with a thought now?" Amelia asked cautiously.

"I suppose that it *does* look that way. I've just internalized and compacted so much of the spell now that it's not much more challenging than casting a Wizard's light. If

you break it down, it's all still there, the incantation, the gestures and the diagram, plus the magic to fuel it all. But I've done the spell enough times that I can just call it up and let it happen. I don't even have to think about it anymore." Paul carefully explained.

"So, are you going to summon your familiars for your demonstration?" Nicholas asked curiously.

"Yeah. But that's kind of just an added bonus..." Paul began to say when Professor Ortega led the teachers into the classroom.

Paul had a million and one thoughts flying through his head at once and very nearly missed the fact that following the regular teachers were a few more. Mr. Hind, Ms Ipsum, Mrs. Herdez and Mr. Plaven followed along and took their places right along with the other teachers.

Rather than start speaking right away, Professor Ortega looked back toward the classroom door expectantly.

Paul followed his gaze and was shocked to see D, Lucky, a woman that Paul didn't know and Marsha, from the office, walk into the classroom.

"It seems that due to certain circumstances, things today will be done out of their customary order. If young Mr. Darroch will step forward and give his presentation, then he may be on his way to attend to other pressing matters." Professor Ortega said to the entire class, but finished with his focus on Paul.

"Yes sir." Paul said as he nervously stepped forward, then thought to say, "I've never seen anyone give a presentation in here before, so I'm not sure what you're used to. I figure that just about everyone does a summoning for their first presentation, so I'm not going to do that."

"Understood. Please continue." Professor Ortega said calmly.

Paul nodded, then looked around the room.

He took a few steps toward the nearest wall, then looked back at Professor Ortega consideringly.

Having judged that the distance was adequate, Paul took a page from G's book and dramatically raised his hands as he internally cast the spell to create a large wide stone pillar. Although the pillar was nearly six feet wide, it only came up to just past his knees.

Paul spread his arms even wider, then made a quicker lifting gesture. As he did so, eight slender pillars rose up, surrounding the low pillar in the middle.

As corny as it seemed, Paul couldn't resist the urge to snap his fingers as flames burst into being atop the eight pillars.

He then pointed to the center of the low circular stone pillar and an eight pointed spell diagram appeared within the traditional summoning circle.

Most of those present in the classroom were in awe of what Paul was doing, but those who had been around him for a time were cautiously optimistic, certain that the best was yet to come.

Paul pointed upward and another spell diagram came into being, this one suspended in mid-air.

After squaring himself before his creation, Paul then moved one foot forward and leaned in as he used both arms to make a grand clockwise gesture.

As he did, another spell diagram appeared, this one being vertical, suspended evenly between the upper and lower diagrams, hovering in the air.

In a booming voice that none present could ignore, Paul called the primary invocation of his spell.

"As above, so below.

"I call upon the forces of unyielding pain to fuel this, my spell.

"In this act, let innocence be forsaken.

"Let the trap of its vile luxury be revealed.

"Grant harsh clarity that we might see.

"As above, so below."

As the last words fell from his lips, a murky gray mist began to swirl in the center of the vertical spell diagram.

Everyone in attendance watched in horror and anticipation as the vortex widened and the first flickers of flame could be seen through the clearing mist.

Everyone was speechless as they could clearly see into a rocky cavern lit with pools of flaming liquids, what some might call a lake of fire.

"This is The Meayithan Realm, a hell dimension." Paul said gravely.

Just as people were beginning to come to grips with actually being able to physically *see* into hell, a sudden movement drew everyone's attention.

"Those are the Yaggoral. The Meayithan Realm is their home." Paul said loudly and clearly.

As everyone watched, the two lizard-like creatures simultaneously leaped off the rocks they had been climbing and appeared to grow wings in mid air.

They flew in slow circles at first, but the circles became tighter and faster as they went.

A whirlwind seemed to be forming in the center of their circle and little flecks of light began dancing around.

"As you can see, the Yaggoral have access to demonic magic." Paul announced dispassionately.

As he said the words, the Yaggoral flew off in different directions, releasing a storm of lightning and fire. As the light exploded, it revealed that what had appeared to be a claustrophobic little cave was, in fact, a massive canyon. The most disturbing feature during the brief blast of light was the glimpse of *hundreds* of glowing eyes looking down upon the fire.

Paul turned his back on the spectacle, then pointed to the floor in front of him.

A full pentagram appeared, expertly crafted in every detail.

Five balls of flame appeared at the points of the star as he began to speak.

"The time has come.

"Follow my voice.

"Your master summons you.

"Come to me now.

"Heed my command.

"Come forth.

"I demand it!"

Those who were watching the large portal could see a gray blur appearing in the center of the fiery meeting place.

Those who were watching Paul saw the gray blur appear in the center of his spell diagram.

It took a moment for everyone to catch on to what was about to happen, but once most of them had figured it out, they watched the two Yaggoral enter the vortex in The Meayithan Realm and emerge from the vortex in the spell diagram at Paul's feet.

Paul waved his hand and the summoning diagram at his feet vanished.

When it did, the two Yaggoral took to the air and came to rest on Paul's shoulders.

"Okay. I lied. I *did* do a summoning after all." Paul said with a grin, then turned and made a grand gesture toward the vertical spell diagram.

The vision was obscured by mist for a moment, then the mist dissipated. Paul made a grand counterclockwise motion with both hands and the vertical diagram disappeared. Motions upward and downward caused those diagrams to disappear too.

With one grand 'lowering' gesture, the flames all went out and all the pillars, both narrow and wide, withdrew into the floor.

Paul walked toward Professor Ortega and asked, "Was that okay?"

"I believe that I can speak for everyone when I say that it was a *tad* more than we were expecting." Professor Ortega said diplomatically.

Paul nodded that he understood.

"Be that as it may, Mr. Darroch has asked that you be excused from class for the remainder of the afternoon so that you may attend to some rather urgent business." Professor Ortega said seriously, then leaned in a little to confide, "I don't believe your absence will have an adverse effect on your grade."

"Thank you Professor." Paul said sincerely.

"We need to be going, we have an appointment shortly and we still need to collect your brother." D said urgently.

"Oh. Okay." Paul said and rushed away to collect his backpack.

"Paul?" D called after him.

When Paul looked back, D was pointing toward one of his shoulders.

Paul looked at him with confusion for a moment, then realized what he was indicating and said, "Guys, you need to be in your natural forms if we're going to be around people."

Neither of the Yaggoral objected, they simply changed into their 'natural' forms, right in front of everyone in Paul's class.

"Are you ready?" D asked urgently.

"Yeah." Paul said after him, then turned back to the class and said, "I'm sorry that I'm not going to get to see everyone else's presentations. I was really looking forward to it. Maybe next Friday."

Before anyone could respond, Paul was out the door with D, Lucky, Marsha and the mysterious woman that they had brought with them.

* * * * *

"That was wicked cool!" Lucky exclaimed when they walked into the hallway.

"Shhh. School is still in session." D reminded him.

"Thank you." Marsha said to D, then looked down to Lucky and quietly said, "It *was* wicked cool."

Lucky beamed a smile up at her as they walked at a brisk pace down the hallway.

"We need to collect your brother, and then be on our way." D said seriously.

"Okay." Paul said simply as he kept pace with the others.

"Professor Ortega mentioned in the teacher's lounge that you were intending to give a presentation. I hope that the teachers from your other classes being present didn't make you nervous." Marsha said quietly.

"Once I got started, I was so focused on my spellcasting that I pretty much forgot about who else was there." Paul said honestly.

"Am I to understand that you've only been practicing magic for one week?" The mysterious woman walking with them asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Paul confirmed, then added, "You caught me on a good day."

"Paul, I'd like for you to meet Sojourner Tavis-Dean. I've retained her services to help with your adoption." D explained carefully.

Before Paul could even register what D had said, Marsha led them into a classroom.

* * * * *

The group stopped just inside the door and silently looked at the people standing around the room.

At first glance, it looked like some sort of twin convention. Paul couldn't help but look them over critically and was pleased to see that none of them were on the same level as Lex.

"Professor Woo, I'm sorry to interrupt, but would it be possible for G Darroch to be excused from the remainder of your class today? He's needed for a family matter." Marsha asked respectfully.

"That won't be any problem. The level of proficiency that young Mr. Darroch has demonstrated today is such that I have no advice to give him to improve his performance." Professor Woo said professionally.

"Thank you Professor." Marsha said sincerely, then turned her attention to G and said, "We need to be going, time is of the essence."

"I'm over here. That's my project. I call him Lex." G said as he stepped forward.

Marsha was obviously surprised, but quickly hid it and said, "Come along."

* * * * *

As soon as they were out of the classroom, Marsha excused herself and left the opposite way from the rest of their group.

"Sojourner, this is my son G. G, this is Sojourner Tavis-Dean. She's our lawyer for family law matters. We're going to a hearing for Paul's adoption and I thought that you'd want to be there." D said seriously as they walked at a hurried pace.

A small bark from Paul's shoulder caught his attention.

"G, Mah Zah wants to spend some time with you." Paul said as he reached up and took the puppy off his shoulder.

"Come over here and tell me what you've been up to." G said tenderly as he accepted Mah Zah from Paul.

"Is there anything the boys need to know going into this?" D asked Sojourner seriously.

"To be honest, I could have filed the paperwork with the court without any of you being present. The only reason that we're going is on the off chance that the judge might want to talk to any of you to be sure that you really want this." Sojourner admitted as they walked through the front doors of the school and out into the sunlight.

"So there's a chance that we won't even get to talk to the judge?" D asked cautiously.

"Yes. I'd say that it's more likely than not that the judge will read the petition and order that a court date be set. But I wanted all of you to be there just in case. If the judge decides that he wants to talk to you, he *might* choose to expedite matters. Your presence could make what is normally a long, drawn out process into something extremely simple."

"What about Mom? Shouldn't she be there too?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Beth, Kyla and Star are going to meet us at the courthouse. They've been shopping all morning and are relatively nearby." D said seriously.

Paul nodded as he followed along, toward D's car.

"Thanks for getting me out of class, Dad. I really want to be there when Paul's officially made my brother." G said sincerely.

"It's important to all of us." D assured him as he clicked his key fob and the car chirped.

"Yeah. Plus, I want you to be there." Paul said to G honestly.

"Paul, you'll need to send your familiars back before we go into the courthouse." D warned him.

"I know. I'll do it when we get there. Mah Zah and Ginh Zah helped me out so much today that I want to be sure that they know how much I appreciate them." Paul said, mostly to the kitten on his shoulder.

"Does that mean that your presentation went well?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. I think so. Mah Zah and Ginh Zah did this really big fire and lightning burst that was incredible. I bet that half the people in Wizardry are going to have nightmares tonight just from that alone." Paul chuckled.

"It *was* amazing." Sojourner added quietly.

"I'm sorry I missed it." G said honestly.

"Well, at least I didn't miss you getting to show off Lex. Your self-portrait was the best of anyone's." Paul said confidently.

"I don't want to sound like a prick about it, but it actually was. I mean, I don't think anyone else put in the time and effort that I did. I know all of them have the talent... well, most of them. But I think they probably left it until the last minute and realized too late just how hard it was." G explained.

"The fact that Marsha couldn't tell you from your portrait was enough to convince me." D chuckled.

"You know, the possibilities for mischief are *endless*." G said with his classic smirk firmly in place.

Paul smiled at him, feeling boundless joy welling in his heart.

* * * * *

"Thanks again for everything you did today. I'll probably call on you again later tonight." Paul said as he created a small vortex in his lap.

Ginh Zah meowed once and Mah Zah yipped before walking through.

"You have incredible talent for someone who just came into their magic." Sojourner said honestly.

"I can do mostly little things. I just do them in a big way." Paul said meekly.

"It looks to me like Paul is really good at organizing things and boiling them down to their most basic spells. I don't know anything about summoning, but that's how it looks with his regular magic." G said thoughtfully.

"How are we doing for time?" D asked cautiously.

"We're on schedule." Sojourner assured him, then thought to add, "Thank you again for driving me."

"It just made sense. We were already here and we knew that we'd be coming back." D said casually.

"How are you doing Lucky?" Paul asked gently.

"We got to go a lot of different places and do all kinds of stuff. It was fun."

"I'm glad. I don't know how much fun we're going to have in court, but it might be interesting."

"Lucky will be fine. He can sit with me and we'll keep each other company during the slow parts." D said as he pulled the car to a stop.

* * * * *

"This way. Go through security and I'll be back before you're finished. I just want to make sure that everything is on schedule and that they haven't changed courtrooms on us." Sojourner said before dashing away.

"Whatever you're paying her isn't enough. She's great." G said frankly.

"She's being well compensated for her services. Trust me." D responded.

* * * * *

"Everything's still on track. If you'll follow me, I'll take you to the courtroom." Sojourner said as she met them at the exit from the security checkpoint.

"How long do you think that this will take?" D asked as they walked with her.

"It's hard to say. There are two other cases ahead of ours, so we'll just have to wait and see how it goes."

"I suppose that's better than being the last on the docket."

"It shouldn't take too long." Sojourner assured him as they mounted the stairs.

* * * * *

At the feeling of wandering aimlessly in a maze of hallways, Paul had a momentary flashback of D's house. Although Sojourner obviously knew where they were going, Paul sincerely hoped that he wouldn't be called upon to find his way back to the entrance on his own.

Paul was broken out of his thoughts by the sight of Curtis standing with a group of people in the hallway outside one of the courtrooms.

"Hey Curtis! What's up?" Paul asked as they approached.

"The judge cleared the courtroom so that the lawyers could try to settle out of court. We've been waiting out here forever." Curtis said as he looked past Paul at the people accompanying him.

When Paul noticed he said, "Curtis, you know G, this is our cousin Lucky, our dad, D, and our lawyer Sojourner. Everyone, this is Curtis. He's one of the people who will be coming to our house tomorrow."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Curtis. Both my sons have spoken very highly of you." D said formally.

"Is there any way that Curtis and his group can come with us? They're here to observe actual court cases, but the case they were watching got stalled and all they're getting to *observe* is the hallway while the lawyers are talking."

"Sojourner?" D asked simply.

"Don't you think we should talk to their teacher before we start making plans for them?"

"Sure. If you want to think 'in the box' about it." D said with a grin, then asked, "Curtis, where's your teacher?"

"Mrs. McBride?" Curtis called to a woman a few feet away.

"Yes?" The teacher responded with a slight note of irritation in her voice.

"Mrs. McBride, my name is Aloysius Darroch. My sons are friends with some of your students. Curtis just filled us in on your situation and we were wondering if you'd be interested in having your students visit our courtroom. We'll be going in for our hearing in a few minutes and if you'd like to join us, my attorney can talk to the court clerk and ask permission."

"There doesn't seem to be any end in sight for the case we were supposed to be observing, so if there's any way you could arrange something like that, I would appreciate it."

D looked at Sojourner expectantly.

"No promises." Sojourner said firmly, then walked away.

"Hey, aren't you the new guy who went to my Linear Algebra class, like, three times, then dropped out?" A familiar looking boy asked Paul as he approached.

"Linear Algebra? Is that what that was?" Paul asked slowly.

"Since you're wearing a school uniform, I'm guessing that you must not have dropped out after all." The boy continued.

"No. I was transferred to different classes where I actually had some hope of learning something." Paul said frankly.

"Paul's the guy I was telling you about. His mom and G's dad just got married and they automatically became brothers." Curtis told the boy seriously.

"That was *you*? I didn't make the connection. I suppose I should have from the timing."

"Well, if Curtis has told you about me, then you know that I'm Paul. I'm sorry, but I don't remember meeting you before." Paul said cautiously.

"I'm Oscar. And we never met. We were just in the same class for a couple days."

Paul nodded, then looked at Curtis to see if he had anything to inject into their conversation, since he was the only acquaintance that they had in common.

"Oscar and I are in about three different classes together. So we get to see a lot of each other." Curtis said simply.

Paul nodded that he understood, but didn't have any idea of how to continue the conversation.

"The court clerk was happy to agree. They'll be opening the doors to our courtroom any minute and Mrs. McBride's class group are welcome to come with us." Sojourner said as she approached.

"Good work. Thank you." D said appreciatively.

"Yes. Thank you so much. Although I want my students to get a taste of the reality of the court system, I think that we've experienced quite enough of *this* particular reality." Mrs. McBride said earnestly.

"Let's go, then. We've got just enough time to get there before the doors open." Sojourner said urgently.

D looked around anxiously, then made sure that he had Paul, G and Lucky in tow as he followed Sojourner down the hall.

* * * * *

"There you are!" Beth said with relief. She was standing with Kyla, Star and several other people who were waiting for the courtroom doors to open.

"We ran into some of Paul and G's friends along the way. Don't worry. Everything's under control." D assured her as they approached.

"Lucky hasn't been any trouble, has he?" Kyla asked cautiously as she looked at her son accusingly, as though she could see into his soul.

"Not at all. He's been helping me all day." D said in a completely credible voice.

Beth gave D a firm hug, then quietly asked, "Have you told him yet?"

"No. I said that I wouldn't."

Paul could just barely overhear what they were saying and his interest was piqued.

"I swore to myself that I wouldn't put this off until the last minute..." Beth said quietly.

"But you did. This is *literally* the last minute. Tell him." D said firmly.

Beth nodded her acceptance, then turned and said, "G, could I talk to you for a minute?"

G looked up and Paul couldn't help but smile at G's 'deer in the headlights' expression.

Beth walked over to him, then drew him away so that they could talk privately.

"What's going on?" Curtis asked curiously.

"I don't know for sure." Paul said honestly, then added under his breath, "But I can guess."

Paul and Curtis watched silently, trying to get any clue as to what Beth and G were talking about.

Between one moment and the next, G's usual easy going expression fell away and was replaced by one of complete shock.

Paul smiled at the reaction as he continued to watch.

Beth said something else and seemed to be deadly serious about it.

G suddenly lurched forward and pulled her into a firm hug.

"Um, I'm guessing that it's something good?" Curtis said uncertainly.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure it is." Paul said warmly.

A movement drew Paul's attention and he turned to see the doors to the courtroom opening.

The bailiff stepped into the hallway and said, "Please take your seats and disable all personal electronics. We're a few minutes behind, so as soon as everyone has settled into place, I'll be calling the first case."

Paul made sure to stick close to D as the group funneled in through the open doors. He noticed that G was virtually glued to Beth's side and couldn't help but smile.

* * * * *

The family were able to find seats together and D made a point of having Lucky in the seat next to his.

Paul could see how special it was to Lucky not only to be allowed to sit with D, but to be *wanted* by him.

Even if Paul had never formed a relationship of his own with D, he was certain that he would have the utmost admiration and respect for the man simply for the way that he treated Lucky.

* * * * *

As promised, as soon as everyone had found seats, it was announced that court was in session and then the first case was called.

Although Paul had an inquisitive nature and would normally watch such a thing with interest, he basically ignored what was happening in the front of the courtroom in favor of keeping tabs on his family.

Kyla and Star seemed to be in their own little world. They were quiet and well behaved enough, but Paul couldn't detect any indication of their awareness of anything outside themselves. They certainly weren't paying attention to what Lucky was doing.

By all appearances, D seemed to be paying attention to the court case. But Paul couldn't help but notice that every so often, D would lean down and whisper something to Lucky.

Beth was sitting on D's other side and next to her was G, who seemed to be completely in his own world.

For as much as Paul would like to have been beside G to help him deal with whatever was bothering him, things had worked out that Paul was seated between Lucky and Kyla.

The 'smack' of a gavel drew Paul's attention and he listened for the next case being called.

"The court calls Aloysius and Elizabeth Darroch to come forward and present their petition." The Bailiff announced to the room.

Sojourner stood and handed the bailiff a stack of papers before calmly saying, "If it pleases the court, Mrs. Tavis-Dean, representing Aloysius and Elizabeth Darroch."

After a moment to look over the petitions, Judge Pearson asked, "Do we have Mr. and Mrs. Darroch present in court today?"

"We do, your honor." Sojourner said as she motioned for D and Beth to stand.

"I see by the petitions that you've submitted that you would like to adopt each other's children to legally unify your new family."

"Yes your honor." D said for both of them.

"I see a number of children here with us today. Are the boys... Let's see... Are Paul and Gwayne present?"

"Yes your honor." D said as he motioned for the boys to stand.

"Boys, why don't you come up here so that we can talk for a moment?" Judge Pearson asked pleasantly.

Paul and G both went forward and stood before the bench.

"Come around here where I can see you." The judge said as he motioned toward the easiest way to get around the side of the bench.

Both boys walked behind the bench and waited.

"I suppose the first thing I should probably ask is if you both want to be adopted."

"Yes sir... I mean, your honor." G nervously stammered.

"Yes your honor." Paul said more calmly.

"Paul, what do you see as Mr. Darroch's role in your life, should I grant this petition?"

"He'll be my father. I can't really tell you all of what that means because I've never had a father before but so far he's done everything in his power to make sure that I'm safe and happy and that I have everything that I'll need to succeed in life. I guess if you *officially* make him my father that it won't change much. The only real difference will be that it will kind of remove the escape hatch. If things go wrong, neither one of us will be able to suddenly decide that we're done and bail out. Legally being father and son will be another reason that we'll have to stick together through the tough times." Paul said thoughtfully.

"It doesn't necessarily follow that if you get adopted that you have to have your name changed. Are you sure about that?"

"Yes your honor. I mean, if you say that I can't have my name changed, it won't change how I feel about D and I don't think it will change how he feels about me. I guess the only thing that it really does is show him that I'm proud of him and want the world to know that I'm his son."

"What about you Gwayne? What do you think about having Elizabeth as a mother?"

"She's completely different from what I thought a mom would be like. She's strong and independent and doesn't take any crap. Whenever I thought of what it would be like to have a mom... I thought she'd be all sweet and nice. I mean, Beth is nice, but she's a real person too. I really want for her to be my mom. She's someone who cares enough about me to tell me when I'm being stupid or doing something wrong. I think I need that."

"I realize that this isn't an issue for Paul, but before I can come to a decision about you, Gwayne, I would like to know how you being adopted will impact your relationship with your biological mother, Emaline Ralston Darroch?"

"I don't have a relationship with her. She hasn't been a part of my life since I was a little kid." G said simply.

"I'll never understand a parent who could walk away from their child." Judge Pearson said regretfully, then looked at the boys and smiled wearily as he said, "Go back to your family and I'll make my ruling in just a minute."

"Thank you your honor." Paul said for both of them and despite the fact that they were standing before the judge, he put an arm around G and hugged him, then guided him to walk back to the gallery of the courtroom.

* * * * *

Paul returned to his seat and once again wished that he had found a way to be seated next to G.

The judge sat behind his bench and leafed through legal documents for what seemed like an unnecessarily long time to Paul, although he *was* aware that it was actually probably less than two minutes.

"The petition before the court is a request for the formal adoption of Paul Auren Hiller to Aloysius Darroch. After consideration of all the factors involved, the court is inclined to grant said petition, it is so ordered. In the related petition to legally change the name of Paul Auren Hiller to that of Paul Auren Darroch, the court is likewise inclined to grant the petition. It is so ordered.

"Lastly, in regard to the formal adoption of Gwayne Darroch to Elizabeth Darroch, the court is inclined to grant the petition. It is so ordered. Case dismissed." The judge said and punctuated the statement with a bang of his gavel.

Paul felt his eyes fill to overflowing with tears and suddenly found himself engulfed in D's arms.

He reveled in that feeling for a moment, then noticed that a pair of much smaller arms were also hugging him.

He released his grip on D and let one arm drop around Lucky's shoulders to give him some measure of a hug in return.

Once the emotional moment was over, Sojourner motioned to the family to get their attention, then led them to the back of the courtroom while the next case was being called.

* * * * *

Paul left the courtroom with D's arm draped around his shoulders.

"Well, it's done. How do you feel?" D asked cautiously.

"I don't know yet. It's bigger than anything that I've ever felt before. It might take me some time to come to terms with it." Paul said honestly.

"There's no rush. What we just did, it's forever." D said quietly.

"Thanks." Paul said as he draped an arm around D to return his hug.

"As much as I hate to do this... I have to make a call. Can you forgive me?" D asked cautiously.

Paul laughed at the question, then said, "Yeah. I think I can let it slide."

"Have everyone wait here for a minute. As soon as I'm done with my call, I'll know where we're going next." D said before dashing away.

Paul looked around at his family and noticed Lucky looking up at him uncertainly.

"Did you understand all that?" Paul asked gently.

"D's your dad now, huh?" Lucky asked uncertainly.

"Yeah." Paul said simply.

"I wish he was my dad too." Lucky said honestly.

"He's already your cousin. That makes him part of your family, just like me and G. It may not be the same as having a full-time dad, but you can still do dad things with him and ask him for dad-help when you're needing something like that."

"But I want to have a dad all the time, every day."

"I'm sorry Lucky. Sometimes we don't get to have *exactly* what we want. Sometimes we have to make the best out of what we can have."

Lucky regretfully nodded that he was listening.

"But if you think about it, you're probably better off than a lot of people, even people who have dads at home with them all the time."

"Why?"

"Because even though you don't have a 'dad', you've got D who's a really great person. Some people have worthless dads who hurt them or make them feel ashamed or just ignore them. So even though you don't have D full-time, you know he'll always be there when you need him and that he's someone that you can grow up to want to be like."

"I could never be like D."

"Maybe not, but in *trying* to be like him, you can grow up into a better person than someone who doesn't have any kind of role model."

"Are *you* going to be like D?"

"Not *exactly* like him. But I hope that if I work really hard that I'll be able to develop some of his strength and decency. If I can do that much, I think I'll have a happy life."

"Excuse me for interrupting, but did D say where he was going?" Beth asked Paul cautiously.

"Yeah. He said that he needed to make a call before he knew where we'd be going next. He told us to wait." Paul said as he moved to Lucky's side and draped an arm around his shoulders.

"Do you have any idea of what he's up to?" Beth asked cautiously.

"No. Don't you?" Paul asked with surprise.

"Not a clue." Beth said as she looked toward where D had walked off to.

"Well, this is D we're talking about. Whatever it is, I bet it's going to be amazing." Paul said with a grin.

Beth smiled slightly, then said, "You may be right about that."

* * * * *

When D came back from his mysterious phone call all he would say is that they were on a tight schedule and they had to leave right away.

It was only after they had piled into the cars that Paul realized that they had automatically gone back to the cars that they had arrived in.

Beth, Kyla and Star were in Kyla's car as D, Paul, G and Lucky were in D's.

"What's going on?" G asked his father anxiously.

"I don't know for sure. It's best if I don't say anything." D said seriously.

"You don't know, but we're in a hurry... because we might miss whatever it is... and that would be... bad?" G asked disjointedly.

"Exactly." D said with a single nod to emphasize his certainty of it.

"Okay. I'll give you that one." G conceded, then carefully asked, "Where are we going?"

"To your school." D said with a smile.

"What for?" G asked in true puzzlement.

"I don't know for sure." D said with a grin.

"Right." G said, then threw his hands up in surrender.

"We'll find out in a few minutes. We're almost there." Paul said frankly.

"I can't think of a single thing that this could be. Do you have any ideas?" G asked cautiously.

"Not really. Would you like for me to look into my skaalix and see if I can get a hint?" Paul offered weakly.

"Your what?"

"Skaalix... it's like a demonic sextant. I use it as a divination tool for my Augury class." Paul said simply, then added, "It's in my backpack if you want to look at it."

"Demonic... sextant... Augury... divination tool... You know what? I'm thinking 'no'." G said slowly.

"Suit yourself. It doesn't matter anyway. We're here." Paul said as D pulled into the main drive of the school.

* * * * *

G and the boys waited for Beth, Kyla and Star to park and join them before the group started toward the front doors of the school.

"Can you tell us what we're doing here now?" G asked hopefully.

"I don't know for sure." D said with a mischievous grin.

Paul couldn't help but laugh at G's put upon expression.

D led the way to the office and as soon as he walked through the door, Marsha hurried into the room and said, "We're going to be in the conference room, right over here. Janice has just gone to get everyone."

D smiled politely and followed as Marsha ushered them through the office and into a large room with a massive table in the middle.

"Can I get anyone anything while you're waiting?" Marsha asked as everyone found their seats.

"We just got out of court, so I'm sure that we could all do with some refreshments. Whatever you have will be fine." D said with a smile at her.

"I'll have something for you in just a minute." Marsha promised, then hurried out of the room.

"Are you blackmailing her or something? She really seems to be desperate to please you." G asked curiously.

"I might have made a series of donations to the school, above and beyond the fees for your tuition. That *might* have something to do with it." D said with a sly smile.

'*That explains a lot.*'

'*If there's an ass to be kissed, it's D's.*'

'*That's my dad!*'

'*I could really get used to saying that.*'

The door to the conference room opened and Paul was surprised to see Professor Ortega walking in. He was accompanied by an elderly man who appeared to be in his eighties or nineties.

"Good afternoon. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Professor Ortega, the Senior Professor of Wizardry at this school. My companion is Professor Knox, the Senior Professor of Alchemical Studies..."

"...semi-retired." Professor Knox interjected.

Paul's eyes went wide as he realized that the meeting they were having almost certainly had something to do with him.

The door opened again and Marsha rushed in.

"Oh good, you're already here. Everyone else should be arriving shortly. I have some snacks and drinks on the way. They'll be here any minute." Marsha assured them.

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Bright. I just noticed that I was beginning to feel a bit peckish." Professor Knox said quietly.

Before anyone could think of a response, Mr. Hind, Mrs. Herdez and Mr. Plaven walked into the conference room and stopped just inside the door.

"Please take your seats so that we may begin." Marsha said invitingly.

"Dad?" G whispered urgently to his father, trying to get him to stop playing around and explain what was going on.

D simply smiled at his son for an instant, then turned his attention back to the most senior members of their party.

"Now that we're all here, I suppose that we should just put our cards on the table." Professor Ortega said as he looked around at the variety of people present.

"In the past week young Mr. Paul Darroch has demonstrated abilities that are above and beyond those of his current classmates and would normally be far beyond someone who has been practicing magic for less than a week. It would be a travesty to force him to take classes that are clearly beneath his abilities. It would be, in essence, cutting the meat to fit the box."

Paul felt a rush of anxiety wash over him at the tone the meeting was taking.

"As the Senior Professor of Wizardry, I can say without reservation that Young Mr. Darroch has it within him to become an outstanding Wizard. I believe that should he put his mind to it, that he might be able to breach new realms that mankind has yet to explore."

"Then why am I here?" Professor Knox asked cautiously.

"This is the young man that I was telling you about." Mr. Hind said quietly.

"This little slip of a boy instinctively knows advanced Alchemical methods?" Professor Knox asked dubiously.

"Paul, could you show Professor Knox something, so that he'll understand?" Mr. Hind asked hopefully.

"Yeah." Paul quietly responded, then gestured toward the side of the room as a stone wall erupted from the floor.

After a moment, Professor Knox cautiously asked, "This is Alchemy?"

"This spell is a combination of a Numerology 3D plotter spell, Wizard's lights and Alchemy. I use them in combination like this to make something that looks like real stone. All I really did is changed the fundamental properties of air within the plot to be a solid rather than a gas." Paul carefully explained.

After a moment to consider, Professor Knox began to slowly nod and he finally muttered, "Clever."

"Before you start making decisions, I need to inform you that an idea that Paul came up with for his technomage class has been accepted as original and has been credited to his name. Although he doesn't appear to have any magical talent in the field, he has something more valuable, original ideas. Whatever decisions you make, I'd like for you to consider allowing him to continue to develop his gift. It would be a shame to lose such potential." Mr. Plaven explained plaintively.

"In a related vein, I would like to mention that the group project in Spelling that Paul engineered, successfully integrated four distinct disciplines of magic from four different magic users. That is another talent that it would be a shame to lose if it weren't nurtured." Mrs. Herdez said frankly.

The door opening caused all in attendance to look in that direction.

One of the workers from the cafeteria pushed a cart of food into the room.

"Thank you Louise. That looks lovely." Marsha said gratefully.

"Give me a moment to set it out and then I'll be out of your way." Louise said without slowing her pace for an instant.

* * * * *

Once Louise was done placing platters of different finger foods and pastries around the table, she also sat out some pitchers of water and juices along with stacks of plastic cups.

She finished by setting a filled coffee carafe with paper coffee cups near D's place setting and another carafe with hot tea nearer to Professor Ortega.

It took a few minutes for everyone to serve themselves and get back to their original places, but eventually everyone seemed to be prepared to continue.

"It would be a shame for young Mr. Darroch to be deprived of his necessary education, so whatever else we come up with, I will tell you now that I will be against removing him from his regular classes." Professor Ortega said firmly.

"Which only leaves his afternoon specialty classes." Professor Knox said, completing the thought.

"I still have much to teach him, but with the ability he's demonstrated in the past week, I feel safe in saying that he won't be deprived to any significant degree by having less specialized Wizardry class time. It would be the height of hubris for me to believe that our teaching methods were responsible for young Mr. Darroch's success. We will continue to teach him. He will continue to learn. But I feel certain that adding more specialty classes into his schedule will only give him more opportunities to thrive." Professor Ortega said frankly.

"I will take him as my student." Professor Knox said as he continued to focus most of his attention on the stone wall that Paul had created.

"What was that?" Professor Ortega asked curiously.

"Being semi-retired, my schedule is somewhat flexible. One day a week, Paul can come to my office and I will teach him... as I was taught. I'll teach him the old ways and reveal a few of the darker secrets of Alchemy." Professor Knox said somewhat distantly.

"Thank you Professor." Paul said in an overwhelmed voice. He could only imagine the wealth of knowledge that Professor Knox possessed, and he was going to have the opportunity to learn from him, one-on-one.

"Mrs. Herdez? Do you believe that Professor Bielecki would like to invest some time into teaching young Mr. Darroch the art of spellcasting?" Professor Ortega asked curiously.

"I've shown Professor Bielecki the completed project that Paul and his group presented to me this morning. It was his judgement that Paul should be given special assignments to encourage his talent for cooperative spellcasting, but I don't believe that he will need to have extra class time to do that." Mrs. Herdez said thoughtfully.

"What about you, Mr. Plaven?" Professor Ortega asked curiously.

"Thank you Professor. I realize that TechnoMagic is a relatively new field of study. I appreciate that you're willing to entertain the notion that it has some value. If it is at all possible, what I would like to do is have Paul join in the TechnoMagic 2 specialty class once a week. That will give him ample opportunity to be inspired and develop new ideas while not overburdening him with a class where he has no actual magical advantage." Mr. Plaven said carefully.

"Professor Knox, are Tuesdays good for you?" Professor Ortega asked carefully.

"Yes. That sounds perfect." Professor Knox said with a smile.

"Mr. Plaven, what would you think of Thursday?" Professor Ortega asked hopefully.

"I think that would be just fine." Mr. Plaven said confidently.

"Very well. Then young Mr. Darroch will continue to have his Wizardry specialty classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday... If that's alright with you, Mr. Darroch."

Paul looked to see D's reaction, but then realized that Professor Ortega had been addressing him.

"Yeah. That sounds great!" Paul stammered.

"It may be necessary to make adjustments over time, but I believe that this will suffice for now." Professor Ortega said with a smile.

"Young man." Professor Knox said, directing his statement toward Paul, "Such opportunities are all too rare, and when they're gone, they're gone forever. Make the most of them."

"I'll try to, Professor." Paul sincerely promised.

Professor Knox smiled his approval of the answer.

"Mrs. Bright, I hope we didn't step on your toes too much, making these decisions without your input." Professor Ortega said carefully.

"If I had any objection I would have told you." Marsha assured him, then continued, "Although I normally see to scheduling the academic studies of all the students, in a special case such as this, I'm happy to see that you're making decisions based on what's best for the individual when his needs are outside of my field of expertise."

A long moment of silence followed, which was broken by D saying, "Well, if there's nothing else, I think I'm ready to go home and relax for a while."

Paul looked around the room to see if anyone were going to object, but instead found everyone getting up from their chairs.

"Marsha, thank you for arranging everything for us. I appreciate all that you do." D said to her with a smile.

"Thank you." Marsha said and smiled in return.

Chapter 14

"Paul? Aren't you happy?" G asked cautiously as they rode home.

"Yeah. I'm just... it's just kinda big to take in all at once." Paul tried to explain.

"If I was sitting back there with you, I'd give you a big hug to help you deal with it."

"I can do that!" Lucky quickly volunteered. Before anyone could react, Lucky had gotten out of his seatbelt and was hugging Paul firmly.

"Thanks Lucky. That was just what I needed." Paul said quietly as he returned the hug.

* * * * *

There was little conversation the rest of the way back to the house. D and G could both understand that Paul needed some time to acclimate to all the sudden changes in his life.

"Come inside. I'm sure that everyone is in a mood to celebrate." D said as he pulled the car to a stop.

"We need to get changed." G reminded his father as he opened his car door.

"Don't take too long. I'm sure that Beth is going to want to make a big deal out of today's events." D said firmly.

"Don't worry. I won't rain on her parade." Paul said as he undid his seatbelt.

"Just try to be happy. Take a little time to enjoy your achievements." D said more gently to his newly adopted son.

"I *am* happy." Paul automatically responded.

"You have a funny way of showing it." G said as he leaned into the car, waiting for Paul to get out.

"I guess I do." Paul said with a grin at him.

That little glimpse of a smile was all that G needed, to know that Paul was going to be alright.

* * * * *

When Paul finally exited the car, he noticed that Lucky was automatically going with him and G.

"Are you feeling better?" G tentatively asked.

"I guess so. I don't know what that was."

"It's like you said, you're trying to take in a lot of things at once. You're overloading. Take a few minutes to relax and de-stress before you force yourself to face anything more." G said as they walked around the side of the house.

***

As soon as G cleared the front door of his room, he began to strip off his clothes.

Paul glanced at Lucky to see his reaction and found him staring wide-eyed.

"No one is allowed in G's room unless he invites them. This is a place where he can be naked if he wants to." Paul calmly explained as he began to unbutton his shirt.

"What about you?" Lucky asked quietly.

"I get naked too. But we're not going to do that now. We've got to get changed and go back into the house."

As if in response to Paul's words, G slipped out of the rest of his clothes.

When G noticed Paul and Lucky staring at him, he said, "I need a quick shower. I feel gross."

Paul and Lucky watched as G continued out of the room and into the bathroom.

"Of course, I could be wrong about that." Paul finally said.

Paul looked down at Lucky and noticed the lost and confused expression that he was wearing.

"As a boy grows up, his body changes. It's nothing scary but it can be a little weird for you if you don't know what to expect." Paul said gently.

"They told us about stuff like that in our health class, but I never saw someone older than me naked before."

"I think that you're growing up a lot like I did. The most important thing to remember is that it's normal to be curious. You don't need to feel like you're doing something wrong. A lot of guys like us get messed up because of that."

Lucky stared as Paul finished getting out of his school uniform.

Paul walked to the closet in the bedroom wearing only his underwear as Lucky followed a step behind.

After selecting the casual clothes that he was going to wear, Paul looked at Lucky and asked, "Do you have any questions?"

"You've got more hair than G."

Paul looked down at himself and noticed the few stray sprigs of hair on his chest and the little dusting of hair that led from his navel to beneath the waistband of his underwear.

"Yeah. We're all different that way. One of the guys in my gym class, his name is Karras, when he's naked he reminds me of a chimpanzee. I've never seen someone our age with so much body hair."

"So it's not wrong to look?" Lucky asked anxiously.

"That's kind of hard to say. I mean, it's not wrong to *look*, but it's wrong to stare. Plus, some people are insecure about their bodies or afraid of being looked at in a sexual context..." Paul trailed off as he realized that he was speaking a little above Lucky's level. "Don't try too hard not to look but don't stand and stare either. Just... chill. Look if you want to, then move on. If you'll do that, no one should have a problem with you."

"I guess that's what I do in gym class in school. It's just you and G, you're so much older... it's different." Lucky said thoughtfully.

"We're not *that* much older than you are. It just seems that way because we grow up so fast. I bet that in a year or two you'll probably be a lot taller and your whole body will be changing in a dozen different ways all at once." Paul then seemed to remember what he was doing and started getting dressed.

Lucky watched him dress, but seemed not to be seeing. His gaze was distant as he was lost in thought.

When Paul finished dressing, he stood silently and waited for Lucky to come back to himself.

"You said that you and me are a lot alike." Lucky said quietly.

"Yeah. We both grew up without dads. That means that we didn't have the same examples to follow that other people did. I can't really say that it's a bad thing..."

"...it feels bad." Lucky interrupted.

"I know." Paul said as he moved forward and draped an arm around Lucky's shoulders, then continued, "Maybe we didn't have dads to give us advice and show us the way, but we've got each other and we've got D, who we can go to whenever we need 'dad' advice."

"For as long as I can remember, I've been jealous of Star. It's like her and Mom talk the same language and I'm left out." Lucky said as he snaked an arm around Paul's waist and returned his casual hug.

"Not only are they girls, but they're 'girly' girls. That's a special thing that they have. Maybe you aren't a part of it, but when you look at the things that they enjoy doing, would you really want to be? I mean, all the girly girl stuff that I've ever seen is really boring."

Lucky nodded his agreement with the statement.

"I know that sometimes it's lonely but that's another thing about guys. A lot of us are alone. It's not a bad thing. It just is."

"Are you guys waiting on me?" G asked as he walked out of the bathroom, naked as the day he was born, toweling his hair dry.

"Yeah, but it's not like we're in a rush or anything. It gave us a chance to talk." Paul said simply, then looked down to Lucky to see how he was doing.

As expected, Lucky was staring wide-eyed at G's naked body.

"Lucky's never been around older guys when they were naked before." Paul said to forestall any misunderstanding.

"I never had that problem. Before I got my room out here, I used to have the room right next to Dad's and we'd share his bathroom. I'd go in and shower while he was shaving, I guess so that he could keep an eye on me. I saw him naked all the time, so it was just kind of normal for me." G said as he walked past Paul and Lucky to get clean clothes.

"That's what I'm talking about. You get used to it, then you never have to worry about if you're staring too much or looking like you're too shy. After that, if someone notices you looking and they have a problem with it, you'll know that it's their problem, not yours." Paul carefully explained.

"You guys worry about this stuff too much. Be yourself and don't apologize for it. That's it. That's how you get by." G said seriously.

Paul rolled his eyes, then quietly said to Lucky, "It helps if your dad has more money than God and pretty much owns half the school."

"I don't flaunt it, do I?" G asked curiously.

"No. You don't. I'm just saying that guys like me and Lucky might have to face consequences that you've never had to deal with." Paul said frankly.

G thought about that for a moment, then finally said, "I don't know how it is to be anyone but me, so I can't really say."

"It's nothing to worry about. Lucky has some of the same questions that I've had so I'm doing what I can to answer them. Hopefully, it'll help."

"Are you ready? They're expecting us."

"Yeah. Just let me drop my uniform in the hamper." Paul said as he gathered what he had been wearing.

"Give it here. I've got to comb my hair anyway."

Paul handed G his uniform, then asked Lucky, "How are you doing?"

"I don't know."

"Fair enough. Just remember that if you have any problems or questions that you've got people that you can talk to. Even if it's something embarrassing and especially if it's 'guy' things."

"Are we ready?" G asked as he emerged from the bathroom with his hair neatly combed.

"Yeah. I think we're good." Paul said as he draped an arm around Lucky's shoulders and guided him to walk out of the bedroom.

***

"I wonder how big of a deal they're going to make out of things." Paul said as they stepped out of G's room.

"Let's see... we both had presentations that we did great on, we both got adopted, then as an added bonus, *you* got picked to be personally taught Alchemy by a Senior Professor. If I were going to guess, I'd say that they're going to make a pretty big deal about it." G said honestly.

"How about we just go back to your room? I've got a lot of reading that I need to do for school next week." Paul asked plaintively.

"You know, things like this are kinda the payoff that parents get for having kids in the first place. It'd suck if we tried to take that away from them."

"Sorry. Yeah. I guess." Paul said uneasily.

"But keep that 'study' thing in mind in case they try to rope us into something really horrible." G cautiously suggested.

Paul thought about that for a moment, then said, "Good plan."

* * * * *

"I was about two minutes away from going out to get you three." D said as the boys walked into the parlor.

"Sorry about that. I needed a quick rinse off. I felt gross." G explained.

"Lucky, over here by me." D said as he scooted over and patted the cushion next to him on the couch.

Paul smiled at the excited way that Lucky took the offered seat, like it was the most special thing in the world.

D then looked at Paul and crooked an eyebrow as he casually indicated the open seat on his other side.

Paul appreciated that D didn't make a big deal of it so that he could gracefully decline the offer if he wanted to without being obvious about it.

Although Paul didn't bounce over like Lucky did, he was no less appreciative of being invited.

Once Paul had settled into place, he noticed that G had secured the seat next to Beth and seemed to be happy enough with the arrangement.

"It's been quite a day. Before we get too much into all of that, I need to give Paul something before I forget." D said as he quickly stood.

Paul had no idea what D had in mind, but from the way he announced it, it seemed like something unrelated to the day's events.

D went to the far side of the room to retrieve something and almost immediately returned to his place on the couch.

As Paul accepted the case from D, he realized what it was.

"Thank you." Paul said in a whisper as he reverently opened the case to reveal a brand new clarinet.

"The man at the store said that he included extra reeds and everything that you would need, but you might want to check it out, just in case." D quietly explained.

"No. Everything's here. It's perfect." Paul said as he explored the storage compartment of the case.

"Would you like to play something for us?" D asked with a smile.

"Could I have some time to get familiar with it first?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Sure. Whenever you're ready." D assured him.

"D tells me that you play the keyboard. Do you have one that you can bring to the cookout tomorrow?" Beth asked G hopefully.

"Actually, I have a couple of them, but there's one that you can wear with a shoulder strap and hold kind of like a guitar. I think that one will be perfect." G said to Beth, then turned to his father and asked, "Will you remind me to bring the amplifier? I think it's in the store room."

"Lucky and I loaded it this morning. It's all taken care of. Just make sure to remember to bring whatever cords and cables you'll be needing."

"I will." G promised.

There was a long moment of silence that followed, which was finally broken by Beth asking, "How did your group presentation end up going?"

"I think it was pretty good. It seemed to take forever, with all four of us casting the long-form versions of our spells at the same time." G said thoughtfully.

Paul nodded, then added, "But everyone seemed to be really impressed with it and they asked some good questions at the end."

"Can you show it to us now?" Beth asked hopefully.

"We *can*. But it's the same thing you've already seen." Paul said slowly.

"Kyla and the kids didn't get to see it and I wouldn't mind seeing it again." Beth said frankly.

"Okay, but we're not going to put on the whole show. It just takes too long." Paul warned.

Beth didn't show any sign of objecting, so Paul turned to G and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Go ahead." G said calmly, obviously prepared to cast his illusion.

Paul concentrated, then taking a page from G's book, he made a dramatic lifting gesture with both hands.

A moment later, G did the same thing, adding his illusion to the construct.

"The spell itself is amazing enough, it's so detailed. But the fact that you can cast it after only one week is almost unbelievable." Beth said as she stood and walked over to examine the exquisite scene more closely.

"It's like I've been saying, I do little things in a big way. From what I've seen, Lucky could probably do the same thing if he could manage to do the multiple spells simultaneously. He's already shown that he has the ability to mix and modify his spells." Paul said seriously.

"He has?" Kyla asked with surprise.

"Yeah." Paul confirmed, then turned to Lucky and asked, "Do you want to show off what you've been able to come up with so far?"

"Can you bring Ginh Zah here first? It'll be better if everyone can see what I was trying to make." Lucky asked hopefully.

"No problem. And besides, I think Mah Zah and Ginh Zah should be here anyway. They're a big part of why I have a reason to celebrate." Paul said as he made a casual swirly motion with one hand toward the floor in front of them.

As soon as the gray vortex became stable, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah walked through.

Paul automatically reached down and picked up Ginh Zah and perched her on his right shoulder. Mah Zah walked directly to G and was placed on his left shoulder.

"Lucky, before you start, let G and I take down our project so it won't distract from what you're doing." Paul said then looked to G with question.

"Let's tear it down." G said with a grin, then made a quick 'dropping' gesture.

As soon as the illusion was dispelled, Paul held his hand out, then withdrew it as the 'solid' form became transparent. He then made a grand counterclockwise gesture and all the color washed out of the structure. As soon as the entire thing looked like it was made of clear glass, he pointed at it and said, "Be gone."

Everyone watched in awe as the delicate structure shattered into nothingness before their eyes.

"Well... that was... surprising." D said in a stunned voice, then added, "You boys certainly know how to put on a show."

"I always thought of myself as being a showman, but Paul blows me out of the water." G said frankly.

"I see G as more of a ringmaster, directing the audience to look at what they need to see. I'm more of the performer, giving the audience a spectacle." Paul said frankly.

"I can see that." D said with a proud smile at 'his' boys.

"What does that make me?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"I don't know. Another performer, maybe. Why don't you show us what spectacle you've been able to come up with?" Paul asked encouragingly.

"I'm not done with this, but it's a lot more than I could ever do before." Lucky said as he looked at his gathered family.

His gaze stopped on Ginh Zah for a moment, then he began to cast his spell.

All the adults were astonished at the level of control that Lucky was demonstrating as he spoke his incantation and simultaneously performed the complicated gestures.

More than once D, Beth and Kyla looked on in confusion at a strange choice of words or an unusual choice of gesture.

Paul smiled as he watched a wireframe structure take form on the coffee table in front of Lucky, made entirely out of Wizard's lights.

Even Paul was surprised when Lucky continued to cast his spell and square patches of white 'fur' began to appear, then drape themselves over the wireframe.

When the last of the 'fur' finally fell into place, Paul was astonished and somewhat horrified by the overall effect. The resulting image that Lucky had created was beyond disturbing to look at. Rather than having actual eyes, the 'cat' had two little

red Wizard's lights, with a patch of black 'fur' surrounding one of them. The 'fur' didn't fit exactly right or cover the entire body. There were gaps which revealed an inky blackness inside. The black whiskers were like a scribbled child's drawing of whiskers and the white teeth were likewise irregular and jagged.

Everyone was stunned speechless by Lucky's grotesque creation.

"Eww!" Star cried out as she tightly clutched her mother's arm.

Ginh Zah responded with a very loud "Meow!"

Paul blinked then turned to Lucky and said, "Ginh Zah said that she absolutely *loves* it."

Lucky seemed to have remembered something and made a few complicated gestures as he spoke a quick magical phrase.

As soon as he did, his wireframe 'Ginh Zah' turned it's weird, misshapen head toward Paul and the actual Ginh Zah and made a sound that was somewhere between a growl and a gasp.

The little glowing red lights seemed to be focused on them. Then an ear twitched, ever so slightly, and the tail flopped lazily to one side.

The sound combined with the movements sent a chill straight up Paul's spine.

"Lucky. *That* is amazing! I don't think *I* could do that." Paul said admiringly.

"I know that I couldn't." Beth said honestly.

"Where did you learn to do that, Lucky?" Kyla asked in amazement.

"G and Paul told me that I could use the spells I already know to do different things." Lucky answered slowly.

Paul noticed that the ears of the 'cat' seemed to shift slightly, then the tail moved again.

"Are you making it move or did you work that into your spell to happen on its own somehow?" Paul finally asked.

"I put some of my 'move' spell into the Wizard's light, so it wouldn't just sit there. I can't make it walk or anything, but it'll move on its own a little bit." Lucky carefully explained.

"Lucky, when we have some time I may be able to help you with making your... creation... walk. Animation is my magical specialty." D said carefully.

Paul thought that D was going to say 'creature' but caught himself before he hurt the fragile boy's feelings.

"Yeah! I wanna be able to make my Ginh Zah be as real as I can." Lucky said happily.

The actual Ginh Zah meowed, rather loudly, right into Paul's ear.

"Ginh Zah says that whatever you do, don't change how it looks. She absolutely loves it just the way it is." Paul relayed seriously.

"I'm glad. I wanted to make it nice, but it didn't come out exactly right." Lucky said thoughtfully as he looked more closely at his creation.

"It's perfect. Ginh Zah says so." Paul assured him.

"Kyla, you'd better be sure that Lucky's school is going to be able to help him develop his gift. It would be a crime if his talent weren't nurtured." D said firmly.

"The kids' school is for witches, but I haven't been too worried about investigating any further than that. Neither of them has shown any exceptional talent before now." Kyla said slowly.

"When you consider that Lucky's talent revealed itself as soon as he was away from their 'instruction' you might consider if it's a suitable environment for him."

"I have a job. I *can't* home school. I don't really have a lot of options." Kyla said frankly.

"As far as Lucky's education is concerned, you have all the options in the world. I promise. If after you've talked to his school, you feel that he would be better off in a more nurturing learning environment, let me know and we'll find a way to make it happen."

"Thank you D. This is kind of hitting me out of nowhere, but I'll talk to them and see what we can come up with. If it turns out that they aren't willing to work with me, I'll get back with you."

"Good." D said with satisfaction.

Paul's attention was drawn by a movement and he glanced back at Lucky's creation. The little red eyes were still focused on him and seemed to be peering into his soul.

'*What have I done?*'

'*What did I just set into motion?*'

'*And is Lucky going to thank me or curse me when this is all done?*'

"Paul, do you want to show Beth and Kyla your Wizardry presentation? I know that they'd like to see it." D asked hopefully.

"I would, but it took Mah Zah and Ginh Zah a lot of time to set up their part of it. If I opened the Oculus right now, all you'd see is darkness. The Meayithan Realm

doesn't have naturally occurring light. All the demons that exist there are either blind or have adapted to seeing in the dark. Mah Zah and Ginh Zah lit fires so that we'd be able to see, then created a big lightning and fire storm so that everyone could get a peek at their home." Paul carefully explained.

"You enacted the Oculus Infernum?" Beth asked cautiously.

"No. Not exactly. It's nowhere near as complicated as that." Paul quickly assured her, then explained, "The Oculus Demonus is a spell from The Meayithan Realm that lets them see into our world. Mah Zah and Ginh Zah helped me modify the spell to work in our world to see back into theirs."

"That shouldn't even be possible." Beth told her son slowly.

"Well, from the way I understand how things work, it wouldn't be for most summoners. I had to use the portal in a portal diagrams to stabilize the Oculus. Everything kept getting reversed and reversed back using three portals inside each other. For a while I didn't think we could do it, but we finally pulled it off." Paul finished with a smile.

"I understand that you can't give your presentation, but I'd like to see the diagrams, if you can manage that." Beth said cautiously.

"Sure." Paul said easily, then pointed across the room toward the big screen television.

A spell diagram appeared on the floor, another on the ceiling and the third appeared vertically between them, floating in mid air.

"How can you even do that?" Kyla asked in amazement.

Paul created a little speck of a Wizard's light a few feet in front of her, then said, "It's just like creating a Wizard's light, but bigger and more complicated."

"Little things in a big way." G said with a grin.

"Paul. I don't know if you realize just how inspired this is. I don't think my father could have created this spell and he's at a master's level of summoning." Beth said as she approached the diagrams to get a better look at them.

"I didn't create it. I adapted it... actually, Mah Zah, Ginh Zah and I adapted it. There's a lot of it that I don't understand, but together we were able to modify it just enough to make it work in the natural realm."

"I'm guessing that yours was the high point of the 'show and tell'." Beth said with a grin at her son.

"I don't know. Probably. I had to leave right after my presentation." Paul said frankly.

"From what Nazzy and Vinda have told me, most of the presentations in Wizardry involve watching someone draw a spell diagram on the floor with chalk, then a bunch of chanting and stuff until a little wisp of smoke or something like that finally manifests." G said informatively.

"But Nazzy and Vinda can both summon big things." Paul interjected.

"Yeah. That's true, but they don't present very often. Once they've shown something, they don't want to do the same thing again. It's like showing off." G said simply.

"While we've got everyone here, do you want to invite Lex to join us?" Paul asked curiously.

"What? Why?" G asked suspiciously.

"Because we're talking about showing off. I showed mine. Aren't you going to show yours?" Paul asked with a wicked grin.

G rolled his eyes, then muttered an aggrieved, "Fine."

It took a few seconds for G to get his spell together, but finally Lex formed into being, standing in front of him.

"That is some *incredible* work." D said appreciatively.

"Did anyone else in your class have a self-portrait turn out as well as yours?" Beth asked curiously.

"No. There were one or two gargoyles and the rest were really creepy bad mannequins." G said simply.

"Can you make Lex move?" Lucky asked curiously.

"Not yet. I'm capable of moving him manually, but I haven't built any movement mechanics into his spell. We'll probably be working on that in class pretty soon." G said frankly.

"Yes. It's wise to perfect the crafting before you devote too much time to the animation. Once you get started on that, everything else will fly out the window." D said sagely.

"I just can't get over it. You really *did* create a perfect likeness of yourself." Kyla said in amazement.

"Paul, do you happen to have your Oculus spell written down? There's something I'm curious about." Beth asked slowly as she looked at his spell diagrams again.

"I haven't written it down, but I can pull the text of the spell up for you to look at if you want." Paul quietly offered.

"Yes. I just can't seem to get how the three diagrams interact." Beth said slowly.

Paul looked around the room for enough open space to be practical, then with the raise of one hand, three stone walls emerged from the floor. Each of them were filled to the edge with glowing Wizard's light writing.

"That's remarkable." Kyla said as she stared.

"It's just the 3D plotter from Numerology and Wizard's light." Paul said simply.

"But you remember the full text of the spell in every detail?" Kyla asked slowly.

"Yeah. It's like I have this notebook inside my head and if I write something down in it, I'll have it to go back to whenever I want it. I can't remember everything like that, just spells, mostly... and sheet music."

"You remember sheet music in every detail?" D asked curiously.

"Yeah. But don't get your hopes up. Even though I've got a good memory, I've got average musical talent." Paul finished with a shrug.

"Paul, on the second tablet of your spell, you're drawing power to fuel the Oculus." Beth interrupted.

"Yeah?"

"In this phrase, are you calling on the energy generated by unjust suffering?" Beth asked slowly.

"Yeah." Paul confirmed.

"I know that with demon summoning you sometimes have to make some distasteful choices, but how can you reconcile yourself with that?" Beth asked with concern.

"I don't create the suffering, I just tap into the energy that's already there." Paul carefully explained.

"Forgive me for asking, but I don't know much about summoning. *Whose* suffering are you tapping into?"

Paul thought for a moment, then turned his head and looked at Ginh Zah inquiringly.

She purred, then finished with a tiny mew.

Paul nodded, then turned back to G and said, "The damned human souls who've descended into hell."

"So you *exploit* the damned?" D asked to confirm.

"Um, they're damned. I think they probably have bigger problems than me skimming off a little of their peak emotional energy." Paul said uneasily.

D looked from Paul to G and then finally to Lucky appraisingly for a moment, before cautiously asking, "Would you boys like to go out and play for a while to burn off some of your pent up energy?"

"Yes!" G immediately exclaimed.

Paul thought that sounded like a very good idea and nodded his agreement, then looked at Lucky inquisitively.

After a moment to consider, Lucky broke into a smile and said, "Yeah. That sounds great."

"Mom, do you want for me to leave the spell and the diagrams up for you?" Paul asked curiously.

"Would you? Even though I doubt that I'll figure out how they work, I'm still interested in trying." Paul nodded his easy acceptance.

G made a quick lowering gesture and Lex vanished.

"Do you want to put your Ginh Zah away?" Paul asked Lucky curiously.

"Can you do like you were saying and make it so I won't forget how to make her?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"No. I can't do anything to help your memory..." Paul began to say but trailed off in thought.

Lucky watched and waited hopefully.

"Just a second." Paul said as a spell diagram suddenly appeared in the air beside him.

He reached one arm into the diagram and a moment later he came back with a spiral bound notebook.

"Paul!" Beth said in astonishment.

"Just a second." Paul said as he opened the notebook and placed it on the coffee table.

Everyone watched as Paul made a few gestures over the notebook, then said, "Okay, Lucky. Do you have magic notebooks that write for you at your school?"

"Yeah." Lucky said slowly.

"Well, I just put a spell on this notebook. All you have to do is touch your finger to the paper, then think about your spell from beginning to end."

"Just like at school?"

"Yeah. Except that you don't need a pencil." Paul assured him.

"Okay." Lucky said as he placed one finger on the notebook.

Paul watched with satisfaction as the page began to fill with Lucky's spell.

"That's easy!" Lucky said happily.

"Yeah. Now turn the page, then you can keep going with your writing until everything's written down."

Lucky didn't answer, but turned the page so he could fill page after page with the spell that he had created.

"Paul." Beth said firmly.

"Yeah?"

"What was that spell you just did?"

"It's a portal spell that I came up with based on the summon reverse-summon that you showed me. I have the other side of the diagram in my locker at school."

"Paul, you really need to be careful using that spell around other people. If they realize that you have an ability that they don't, they'll hate you. If they can't duplicate your magic or take it for themselves, they'll find a way to prevent you from being able to use it, even if it means killing you."

"Don't you think you're overreacting just a little bit?"

"No. I don't think I am. Tell me, why don't we let mundane people know about witches?"

Paul was at a loss for what to say and shrugged.

"Same reason."

* * * * *

As the boys walked out of the house, Lucky asked, "What do you want to play?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not very good at playing." Paul said regretfully.

"Besides the occasional sword fight with Nazzy, neither am I." G admitted.

"Then what are we doing out here?" Paul asked curiously.

"The 'celebration' turned out to be a little darker than I was expecting. I would have agreed to just about anything to get out of there." G said frankly.

"So what are we going to do?" Lucky asked uncertainly.

"Well, I wasn't kidding about the school work. I've got a lot of reading to do and I'd like to get it out of the way before the cookout tomorrow so that I can enjoy the weekend." Paul said seriously.

"I don't have anything that I *have to* do right away, but there are a few things that I could work on to get me ahead for next week." G said slowly.

"I wanna work on my Ginh Zah some more." Lucky said simply.

"Then I guess it's settled. Should we go back in and tell them where we'll be?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Dad will know where to find us. If we're not in the yard, he'll check my room next." G said frankly.

Paul could easily accept that and changed course to walk to G's room.

* * * * *

"Before you get to studying, do you want to give that a try?" G asked Paul curiously.

"Do what?"

"The clarinet. Do you want to try it out and make sure that you have everything you need?" G asked as he glanced at the clarinet case that Paul was still carrying.

"I'm going to need to soak the reed for a few minutes before I can use it. While it's soaking I can assemble the rest of the clarinet and make sure everything fits together right and that all the pads are in good shape." Paul said as G opened the front door to his room.

"Whatever you say." G said slowly as he gave Lucky a wide-eyed look.

"When you told me that you preferred to burn wood in your calliope, I didn't question you. When it comes to the clarinet, trust me to know what I'm doing."

"I *do* trust you. I just couldn't make sense of what you were saying... something about checking your pads?"

Paul rolled his eyes then started to quietly chuckle.

G broke into an unwilling smile.

Lucky couldn't help himself and let out a classic 'little boy' giggle.

Before any of them knew what was happening, all three of them were laughing themselves silly.

* * * * *

When the laughing fit was exhausted, Paul finally said, "Okay, I don't know what that was all about, but I really needed that."

"I think we all did." G said honestly.

"Give me a minute to get my reed soaking, then I need to get my study materials together."

"Are you going to be using stuff from your locker?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. But from here on out I'll be a little more careful about who I let see me use *that* spell."

"Do you really think it's that big of a deal?"

"I don't know. It's probably best if I treat it like it is until I *do* know."

Ginh Zah meowed on Paul's shoulder, drawing his attention.

"Yeah. I'm just going to study." Paul answered her, then turned to Lucky and asked, "Do you mind if Ginh Zah hangs out with you for a while?"

"That'd be great. Maybe she can help me."

"Okay." Paul said with a smile at Lucky, then he took Ginh Zah off his shoulder and held her in front of him as he looked her in the eyes and told her, "Lucky is my cousin. I would be *very* upset if he were hurt."

Ginh Zah meowed in offense at the suggestion.

"Really? What is it that you've been telling me? Oh, right. That you're a *demon*. Isn't that the excuse you like to use?"

Ginh Zah blinked innocently in response.

"Go on." Paul said with a grin, then set Ginh Zah down on the floor.

* * * * *

G took out a book to start reading as Lucky performed his 'Ginh Zah' spell, explaining each step to Ginh Zah as he did so.

Paul soaked a reed for as long as it took him to assemble his clarinet, making sure to carefully check every connecting point and pad.

As soon as the clarinet was ready, Paul glanced at G and Lucky before beginning to play.

The sound of the clarinet was strange to Paul's ears, whether it be from the amount of time since he last played or the different instrument that he was using.

When he finished, G said, "That was great! You're awesome!"

"That's just my warm-up piece. It's something a little bit nicer than 'scales' that I can play to be sure that nothing's sticking."

"Will you play something else for us?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"I'll play one song, then I have to get to work."

Both G and Lucky seemed to be satisfied with the response.

Paul began playing a haunting melody that neither G nor Lucky were familiar with.

As they listened, the music seemed to swell with emotion as it built to its crescendo.

When Paul finally lowered the clarinet, he stopped for a moment not only to catch his breath, but also to collect himself.

"That was AWESOME!" G finally enthused.

"That's about all I've got. The rest of the songs I know are your standard marching band stuff."

"Why don't you know more music like that?"

"I guess because I had to learn the marching band music. It was hard for me to find the time to learn even that one song."

"Dad will get you all the sheet music that you need. Just tell him what you want." G said encouragingly.

"I can read sheet music, but it takes time for me to practice and get used to a new piece. I have too many other things on my mind right now. Maybe I'll be able to find the time later, once I've gotten into a routine at school." Paul said as he began to break down his clarinet.

"You're not going to play any more?" Lucky asked quietly. It was obvious that he was disappointed.

"I was just testing it out to be sure that it worked. I'll be playing lots more tomorrow." Paul assured him.

"I guess this means that we'd better get some studying done before we get called in to dinner." G said unenthusiastically.

"Yeah. Let's do as much as we can now so we won't have to worry about it tomorrow." Paul agreed.

Lucky looked at Ginh Zah beside him and said, "We'd better get to work."

Ginh Zah meowed seriously in response.

* * * * *

Conversation was sparse after that.

Paul, G and Lucky each worked on their own projects as Mah Zah and Ginh Zah supervised.

When the call on the intercom came, announcing dinner, all of them were ready for both a break in the studying and for the food.

After sending Mah Zah and Ginh Zah back to their native realm, Paul walked with G and Lucky around to the front of the house.

"How are you with your studying?" G asked as they walked through the front doors.

"The more I read, the more there is to read. I don't think that there's any end to it. I just have to keep going until I run out of time. Whatever I get accomplished is going to have to be enough." Paul said frankly.

"But do you have what you need done for Monday?" G asked curiously.

"All the projects and presentations are done. For everything else, I'm just trying to get caught up to the rest of the class. That's going to take time. I think that all the teachers understand that."

"It's not going to be bugging you tomorrow, is it?"

"I don't think so. Once you give up all hope, it gets easier... I'll have to remember to tell Curtis about that tomorrow."

"What's that?"

"He likes to collect motivational sayings."

"Actually, 'give up all hope' is kinda the opposite of motivational."

"Yeah, well, maybe he'll like it anyway."

Before G could respond, they arrived in the dining room.

* * * * *

"Did you boys have fun?" Beth asked as they entered.

"We mostly just studied, but Paul set up his clarinet and played for us for a few minutes." G said as he took his place at the table.

"Do you still have a lot of studying to do?" Beth asked curiously.

"It's my first week in new classes, starting in the middle of the school year. I won't be getting caught up for quite a while. I think that I'm doing what I need to be doing right now. Hopefully it will be enough." Paul said calmly, consciously fighting to keep any trace of irritation out of his voice.

"I'm sorry about earlier. There's so much that you should already know and I'm doing my best to protect you." Beth tried to explain.

"Why didn't you do anything before now? Why didn't you at least tell me what was really going on?"

"Isn't it obvious? I thought that you didn't have any magical ability. If that had turned out to be the case, you could have grown up ignorant of the greater world. You could have led a mundane life."

"Why would I want to be ignorant?"

"Because I didn't want you to feel like you were 'less than' other people."

"Mom, I felt like that my whole life, not because I didn't have magic, but because we were dirt poor."

"I did the best that I could. If I hadn't been trying to live a mundane life, I might have been able to reach out to the witch community to make things a little easier on us. But that would have risked exposing you to the magical world."

"So what you're saying is that it's all my fault?"

"No. But I made my decisions trying to do what was best for you in the long term."

"So Paul didn't display *any* magical ability before the wedding?" Kyla asked curiously.

"None at all. Among summoners it's not uncommon for a child to first manifest their magical ability by having an imaginary friend, like a guardian angel."

'*As if.*'

"But Paul never had that?" Kyla prompted.

"No. I kept careful watch. He never had invisible friends or any 'remarkable' wish fulfillment. He was always perfectly ordinary."

"So you knew about D and G being witches all along?"

"Yes. I think that I suspected the first time that D and I met, but it took a few weeks before we came out and admitted it to each other."

"At first I was trying to decide if I could restructure my life to make it possible to carry on a relationship with a mundane woman. When I found out that Beth was a witch, well... all of a sudden I could have everything that I wanted." D said warmly as he looked at his new wife.

"I guess that's when Dad told me about Paul. He wanted to know if i'd be able to deal with having a mundane brother. But since I've always wanted to have a brother, I told him 'no problem'." G added.

"I suppose that I should be grateful that M showed up at the wedding, otherwise Paul's power might not have awakened." D said frankly.

"Yeah. And right now we'd all be sitting here, pretending that there's no such thing as magic." G continued the thought.

"I guess I'll get a feeling of what that's like tomorrow. I can't believe that you were willing to hide who and what you are just so that I could live here in ignorance." Paul said in wonder.

"You invited a non-magical person and his family to visit us tomorrow, didn't you? Even though you know that you're going to have to be careful about what you do and say?" Beth asked slowly.

"Yeah."

"Because he's worth it, right?"

"Yeah."

"We were willing to do what we had to do to keep you as safe and happy as possible. D and G were both willing to live a lie in their own house to protect you."

"So what would have happened if the wedding had gone the way that you'd planned?"

"After the reception, D would have told you that we were leaving the next day and that you needed to go to bed early. G probably would have gone with you to see that you got to sleep while the rest of the family were having their traditional Halloween celebration." Beth quietly explained.

"I can't imagine how that would have been, coming back here and living as a mundane person while everyone around me was hiding the secret from me." Paul said honestly.

"We would have done it without hesitation or complaint. I would be as proud to have you as a mundane son as I am of you as a witch." D said firmly.

"There's something I don't understand. I can see how the product of a human and a witch could end up having no magic, but wouldn't a cambion automatically have magical abilities, no matter which side of his heritage came through more strongly?" Kyla asked curiously.

"It's not a case of one or the other. Just as with witches, there's always the chance that the child will have unexpected abilities or no magical abilities at all." Beth answered.

"Well, from what I've witnessed today, I don't think there's any doubt about Paul's ability."

"What kind of unexpected abilities?" Paul asked curiously.

"I don't know, hence 'unexpected'." Beth said with a smile.

"I mean, do they get different witch powers or is it something more *demonic*?" Paul pressed.

"I can't really say. It can go any number of ways. They might have a demonic appearance with no magic at all. Or they might have a great talent for one specific type of magic to the exclusion of all others."

"For example..."

"Magnetism. Fire. Lightning. Volcanic activity... They're usually very powerful, but also specialized to the point that their ability is mostly useless except under very specific circumstances."

"So what are the chances that my summoning ability is like that?"

"If you were a prodigy at summoning, you would have been attracting all sorts of dead and undead things since you were a young child. According to my family, when a child summoner comes into their power early, they need to be kept away from mundane people for the *years* that it takes to train them to totally control their abilities. I think what you are is more of a late bloomer."

"Great." Paul said flatly, then added more slowly, "But I guess from the sound of it that I'm lucky that I didn't manifest early."

"You manifested when you needed to, when it mattered most." D said simply.

"Yeah." Paul agreed, then looked to his mother, and said, "By the way, I'm fine with being called a witch or a cambion, but 'late bloomer' sounds creepy to me. Can we *not* call me that?"

"Okay honey. I think I can do that." Beth said with a gentle smile.

Paul turned his attention back toward the food that he had been neglecting

* * * * *

"While I've got everyone here, I'd like to show you the color scheme that Kyla and I came up with for the baby's room." Beth said into the silence that followed.

Paul discretely looked up from his food to see everyone else's reactions to his mother's announcement.

D was frozen for a moment with a forkful of food halfway to his mouth. When he realized that, he put the fork down and pasted on an unconvincing smile.

For all the world, Lucky seemed not to have heard and continued to eat his meal undisturbed.

G, on the other hand, was staring back at him with an equal amount of horror to what he was feeling.

"We've narrowed the trim color down to these last few choices. Ghost White has a nice hue and seems to have the right amount of warmth to it, but White Smoke has a gentleness that I can't help but be in love with. Of course Kyla thinks that Baby Powder is an obvious choice for a baby's room and I think Star's favorites alternate between Snow and Floral White..."

Paul was astounded as his mother held up one after another of the little painted white wooden tiles. He was ready to swear that all of them were identical.

"Of course Old Lace doesn't really tie into the rest of the color scheme, but I love it so much that I might just have to revisit that plan. Cream and Linen are a little too classical for my taste, but there's a chance that they might grow on me. They're both very nice."

"That one." D said as he pointed.

"Antique White?" Beth asked dubiously.

"If I get a vote, that's the one I choose." D said firmly.

"But you haven't seen all of them yet. What about Bone or Vanilla?" Beth asked anxiously.

"I'm sure that they're nice, but I already know that I like the Antique White the best. I won't be upset if you decide to go with something else, but I don't need to see any more. That's my vote." D said seriously.

Beth looked at D uncertainly for a moment, then looked to Paul and asked, "Which one do you like best?"

"That one." Paul said as he pointed.

"Don't you want to look at the others?"

"Seeing them all together like this, it's easy to pick out the one I like best." Paul said simply.

"Which one did he pick?" Kyla asked curiously.

"Antique White." Beth said uncertainly.

"G, do you have an opinion?"

"Honestly, they all look white to me."

"Well, they are, but they're different shades and hues. We're looking for just the right one as an accent in the baby's room." Beth carefully explained.

"Well, if I had to pick one... I guess I'd go with that." G said as he pointed.

"Antique White... I guess we have our trim color." Beth said resignedly.

"They might change their minds when they see the primary color and the color of the accent wall." Kyla said seriously as Beth started to gather up the twenty or so 'white' tiles.

"Is it really important for me to be here right now? I'd really like to get some more of my schoolwork done so I don't have *that* hanging over me tomorrow." Paul asked hopefully.

"I suppose that you all seem to be 'of a mind' about things. If you don't have any objection, we can just count D's opinion as your agreement." Beth said cautiously.

"That sounds good to me." Paul quickly agreed, then turned to D and asked, "You don't mind, do you D?"

"No. I don't mind. But now that we've made everything official, would you think about calling me Dad?" D asked hopefully.

"You got it, Dad. Anything you want." Paul said as he got up from the table.

"I'd better go too. Hanging with Paul keeps me motivated." G said as he also got up.

Lucky didn't say anything as he pushed away from the table.

"Lucky, why don't you stay here so that I can work with you on animating your creation?" D asked hopefully.

Lucky looked at Paul and G uncertainly, obviously torn by the decision.

"Be sure to come out to G's room and show us when you're done. I can't wait to see what you and 'Dad' are able to come up with." Paul said with a smile at D.

"I bet it's going to be great." G agreed.

When Paul saw his mother starting to set out a series of tiles, these being nearly identical pastel green he felt a sensation unlike any other that he had ever experienced. It was as though his very soul had just cringed.

"Gotta go." Paul said as he grabbed G's arm and pulled him toward the door.

"Come out and see us when you're done." G said to Lucky before being virtually dragged from the dining room.

* * * * *

After walking for a few minutes, G quietly said, "Dad deserves a medal for sitting through that."

"He saved our asses. We owe him, big time." Paul agreed.

"Yeah. I guess that he's built up some resistance having to sit through all those boring business meetings."

"Even so, we owe him. Let's make sure that we both do everything in our power to make tomorrow go well. He doesn't ask much of us and he gives us everything. I want to do whatever I can to give him a perfect day."

"You really take the adoption thing seriously, don't you?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't have anything to do with this. Even if he hadn't adopted me, he deserves to be happy. If there's anything I can do to make that happen, I will."

"I guess that I'm used to him always doing stuff for me. In my mind it's always been something that dads do."

"I wouldn't know about that, but I'm guessing that *our* dad is something special because the world would be a whole lot better place if *all* dads were as great as ours."

* * * * *

As Paul and G reached the front door of G's room, G quietly said, "It looks like we're going to have some time to be alone."

"Yeah. I thought of that too." Paul quietly admitted.

"What do you think? Wanna have some fun?" G asked with an impish grin.

"Well, I think that out of respect for our parents that we should probably do what we said we were going to do."

"Really?"

"Wait. I'm not finished." Paul said quickly, then added, "We should do what we said we were going to do, but there's no way that either of us are going to be able to concentrate on school work while we're thinking sexy thoughts about each other."

"True."

"So, yeah. Let's go ahead and do it, but as soon as we're done, we need to get to work. We have some serious studying to do and not a lot of time to get it done."

"Yeah. Let's relieve our tension so we can study more effectively." G said as he began to undress.

"Right. It's the mature, responsible thing to do." Paul said with a grin as he followed suit.

* * * * *

A knock on the door caused Paul and G to look up from their respective study materials.

"Come in!" G called in response.

The door opened to reveal Lucky and D.

"How are you guys doing?" Paul asked with a smile.

"Very well. I hope that you don't mind that I came along. I didn't want for Lucky to have to walk out here by himself." D said cautiously.

"Yeah. What with all the dire wolves and sabre-toothed tigers roaming the landscape." G said with a grin.

"You used Lucky as an excuse to get away from the nursery color wheel from hell, didn't you?" Paul asked speculatively.

"It's always good to leave yourself an out." D said slyly without directly confirming Paul's assertion.

"Did you have a chance to help Lucky with his animation?" G asked curiously.

"He and I were able to sort through a few things with his spell, although we weren't in a place where we could actually 'practice' what I was trying to teach him." D carefully explained.

"Can you bring Ginh Zah here so she can see?" Lucky asked Paul hopefully.

"Sure." Paul said easily, then made a motion toward the floor.

The full spell diagram appeared before him, then he began to go through the hand gestures as well as speaking the long-form version of the spell aloud.

D, Lucky and G all watched the performance with appreciation, enjoying the sight of Paul working his craft.

When the vortex finally opened, Mah Zah and Ginh Zah emerged and looked around.

"Lucky is ready to try some modifications to his 'Ginh Zah' spell and he wanted for you to be here." Paul explained as he waved his hand and the spell diagram dissipated.

Ginh Zah let out a 'meow' and Paul immediately translated, "Ginh Zah thanks you."

Lucky smiled, then said, "It's going to take me a minute and I need for Uncle D to remind me about the stuff we talked about, but it shouldn't take too long."

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah sat side by side and waited for whatever Lucky was going to do.

While all attention was focused on Lucky, G leaned toward Paul and quietly asked, "Why did you do the long version of the summoning spell? Are you having trouble?"

"No. I just thought that when I'm around Lucky that I should probably show him all the stuff that I usually do internally. He's never going to learn anything if all he sees me doing is meaningless gestures that really don't have anything to do with the actual spell."

"I should probably do that too. It'll be good practice for when our brother or sister is grown up enough to pay attention to what we're doing." G said thoughtfully.

Paul looked around, then drew G a few steps further away from D and Lucky so that they could speak privately.

"Can you keep a secret?" Paul asked quietly.

"Yeah. I guess so... I mean, I was able to keep from telling you that I'm a witch."

"When you said brother or sister, I think I got a precognitive flash or something. We're going to have a sister."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I think so. But let me get my skaalix and check it out, just to be sure." Paul said before walking over to where he had been studying.

After rummaging around in his backpack for a moment, Paul returned with the metallic sphere in his hand.

"So that's like a sphere within a sphere?" G asked as he looked at it curiously.

"Yeah, except that there's probably a dozen or so spheres inside there. Each one of them has different sized and shaped gaps in it so that when you get all the spheres spinning at once, it can create just about any picture that you can imagine." Paul said as he swept one finger across the surface, setting in into motion.

"And you can see the future with this?" G asked curiously.

"Maybe. That's what it seems like, anyway. I'm going to have to work on it some more in Augury class to be sure just how accurate it is. Let's see what it can tell us about Mom's baby." Paul said as he looked into the largest gap in the outer sphere.

"That thing's making me go cross-eyed." G said as he turned away.

"K's a girl. No doubt." Paul said as he continued to stare into the skaalix.

"Seriously? You can really see that?" G asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Paul said as he stepped back to his backpack and put the skaalix inside.

"Why are you putting it away?"

"I don't want to know the future. I want to create it."

"Then why did you look to see if K was a boy or a girl?"

"Because I got a precognitive flash and I wanted to be sure that it was right before I started really believing it."

"So this 'flash' thing, it just happened? You weren't trying to see the future or anything?" G asked curiously.

"No. It just happened. I guess that I've always had it, but it happened so rarely that I always chalked it up to coincidence when it turned out to be right."

"Did you know about me before you got here?"

"No. I didn't have a clue."

"Guys! I think Lucky's ready." D said to draw their attention.

Lucky had already created his weirdly formed, somewhat grotesque, version of Ginh Zah.

"Go on! I know you can do it!" Lucky said to his creation.

The cat-like... thing made a wheezy little hiss, then took a step in the real Ginh Zah's direction.

"It looks like it's working." D said with a smile of pride for Lucky's accomplishment.

"Go on, Zah Zah, say 'Hi' to Ginh Zah." Lucky encouraged.

The misshapen creature let loose another wheezy hiss, then raised a paw in Ginh Zah's direction. The claws that protruded were irregular and misshapen, much like the rest of the tiny beast.

"That's amazing!" G said in wonder.

"You're not doing that, are you? I mean, you're not making her move like a puppet." Paul asked cautiously.

"No. Uncle D told me about different spells to make my animation act like it's alive." Lucky said honestly.

"You named your... work 'Zah Zah'?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. Uncle D said that when I finished I should call it something so that everyone wouldn't get it confused with the real Ginh Zah." Lucky explained.

"That's a good idea. Since you've finished, what are you going to do with Zah Zah?" Paul asked curiously.

"She's going to be my helper. When I'm making new things, she'll be there to remind me of how I made her. Plus, when Mom and Star are doing girl things together Zah Zah can keep me company." Lucky finished quietly.

"Well, that sounds kinda lonely." G said honestly.

Lucky met G's eyes and seriously said, "Sometimes we don't get to have *exactly* what we want. Sometimes we have to make the best out of what we can have."

Paul smiled proudly, hearing his own words being taken to heart.

"Um... Wow. Yeah. I guess you're right." G stammered at the younger boy's intensity.

"Lucky knows that he can call us if things get bad for him. Together we'll see to it that he's never *really* alone." D said confidently.

Paul had a sudden thought and quickly asked, "What would we have to go through to call Lenn?"

"Lennox Teek?"

"Yeah. Would it be a really big deal?"

"I'm sure it would just take me a minute or two to get his number, but it would be well after midnight there right now." D said consideringly, then added, "If you want, I can text you his number and you can add him to your contacts. That way you'll be able to call him whenever you want."

"Contacts?"

"Yes. On your cell phone."

"I don't have a cell phone."

"You *don't* have a cell phone? Good God! How do you even function?!"

"I don't know. Magic maybe." Paul said with a roll of his eyes.

"G, I'll text you Lennox's number when I get back to my office. Maybe you can call him in the morning."

"Thanks Dad." G said with a smile.

"As for you Paul, expect to be receiving a cell phone sometime *very* soon."

Paul shrugged, then slowly said, "Okay."

"Lucky, do you have a cell phone?"

"No."

"You will before you leave."

"Thanks Uncle D." Lucky said happily as he firmly hugged D around the waist.

Paul smiled at the scene before him and realized that D might appreciate a show of his affection.

"Yeah, thanks Dad." Paul said as he stepped beside D and hugged him around the shoulders.

Chapter 15

Paul woke to the sensation of being tenderly held.

G was cuddled into his left side and Lucky was aligned along his right.

Although he had gotten out of the habit of wearing clothing to bed, he found that he wasn't bothered by it. It was a small price to pay to be able to have Lucky spend the night with them.

"Good morning." G whispered into Paul's shoulder.

"Good morning." Paul whispered in return, then stretched down to give G a quick, gentle kiss.

A movement on his other side alerted him that Lucky was also awake.

"When are we going to the cookout?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"We're leaving the house at noon. But there's going to be lots to do before we can go." G answered.

"I've never done anything like this before. You're going to have to tell us what to do." Paul cautioned him.

"Hey, I'm the alpha. That's my job." G said with a grin as he fought to achieve a sitting position.

Paul laughed delightedly at G's declaration as he realized just how 'freeing' it was to have G taking on the responsibility.

"Is it time for breakfast?" Lucky suddenly asked.

"Yeah. Get your clothes on and we'll go." G said easily.

"Let me hit the bathroom and I'll be ready." Paul said as he began gathering his clothes from the night before.

* * * * *

Breakfast turned out to be something of a hurried affair, followed by everyone rushing around like maniacs gathering different foodstuffs, both prepared and raw, and packing them into ice chests on the back porch.

Just when it seemed like they almost had the last of them filled, the doorbell rang, causing everyone to stop what they were doing.

"It's still an hour and a half before anyone's supposed to be here." Paul said, as though no one else had realized it.

"We'd better hurry and answer it before they decide that we're not home." G said as he led the way.

Paul and Lucky automatically followed.

* * * * *

The trio reached the front door just behind D, who arrived from a different hallway.

D opened the door and happily said, "Harper! Thank you for coming all the way out here! Please come in."

Paul looked to G to see if he had any idea of who the young man was.

"That's Harper. He's one of the tech guys." G quietly explained.

"From the tone of your message, I got the sense that time was something of an issue." The young man said simply.

"It could have been. But since you're here, everything's going to be fine." D said as he led Harper past the boys.

Paul, G and Lucky were unsure as to what was going on, but followed along anyway.

"If it isn't a bad time, I had a few questions about the requirements for the computer system that we're going to be installing." Harper said tentatively.

"Actually, I can't think of a better time. Paul's right here. The computer system's going to be for him." D said as he led the way into the parlor.

Harper turned to look at the three boys who had been following them and said, "It's good to see you again G. Would you like to introduce me to your friends?"

"Yeah." G said with a smile, then continued, "This is my new brother, Paul and our cousin, Lucky."

"It's a pleasure to meet both of you. I'm Harper Todd. My company provides technical support for Mr. Darroch, both personally and professionally. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to ask Paul a few questions." Harper said as he took a tablet computer out of his messenger bag.

"Sure. What do you want to know?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Mr. Darroch asked that we assemble the components of your new computer system and preinstall all the necessary software for you. I just wanted to take this opportunity to get some specifics about your software needs and also to prepare for the migration of programs or data from any existing systems." Harper said professionally.

"I don't have a computer. The only data I might have is for school. I have it on a stick that I borrowed from G." Paul said slowly.

Harper seemed to be surprised, but carried on with satisfying alacrity.

"Well then, the next thing we'll need to look at will be the integration of existing social media accounts into a magically secure system. It can be somewhat problematic if not taken into account from the very beginning." Harper said carefully.

"I have email. That's it." Paul said simply.

"Is it on a magically augmented server?" Harper asked cautiously.

"It's Yahoo." Paul said weakly.

"Oh? That's no problem. Yahoo is very witch friendly. All we'll have to do is make one little change in the depths of your privacy settings and your email will be magically secure. You won't even have to change your email address." Harper said as he made a quick note on his tablet.

"Okay." Paul said with surprise.

"What about Facebook, Twitter and all the rest of it? Do you have any established accounts that will need to be migrated?"

"Nope. Just the email." Paul said simply.

"This is going to be easier than I was expecting." Harper said frankly, then continued, "What about software? Are there any particular programs that you'd like to have on your new computer?"

"If you've got a list of what G has installed on his, that would probably take care of me. So far, I've been able to do everything that I've tried to do on his computer." Paul said thoughtfully.

"You sure do make my job easy. I guess all that's left is to ask you if you have any particular preference for a password charm. If you've been working on G's computer, I'm assuming that you already know what that is."

"Yeah. As much as I like his chicken foot, I think that I'd like something a little different." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Do you have any idea of what you'd like that to be?" Harper asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think I'd like a little miniature kewpie doll or something like that. I think that would be every bit as creepy as G's chicken foot but in a totally different way."

"That shouldn't be a problem." Harper said as he made another note on his tablet, then continued, "I like the way you think."

Paul smiled at the declaration.

"Okay. I think that I have everything that I'll need for now." Harper said pleasantly, then looked to D and asked, "Are you ready for me to proceed?"

"It'll be just a minute." D said as he looked toward the door.

Harper nodded, then said to the boys, "Don't be surprised if you see me at your school sometime in the next few weeks. I've been asked to work with the new Technomage students during their specialty classes to give them some insights into the career opportunities available in the field and the realities of being a Technomage in the outside world."

"I might see you if you show up on Thursday. I'll be in that class." Paul said happily.

"Hold on a minute! The boy who doesn't even use Facebook is a *technomage*?" Harper asked dubiously.

"Not really. But Mr. Plaven thinks that I've got some good ideas, so he wants for me to have time to work on them."

"If Ned believes in you, that's all I need to know. I'll do my best to stop in on Thursday to see how you're doing."

"They're here." D interrupted. "You can go ahead whenever you're ready."

Paul looked around and discovered that his mom, Kyla and Star had joined them.

"Paul, why don't we start with you?" Harper asked as he retrieved a cell phone from his messenger bag.

"What do I need to do?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Just hold the phone for a minute while I enchant it and make it yours." Harper said simply.

Paul accepted the phone and held it out in front of him. He noticed that the phone was brand new, but didn't seem to be 'remarkable' in any way. It just looked like a fairly ordinary cell phone.

Harper tapped a few times on his touch screen, then waved the tablet over Paul's hand.

"That should do it. Now the phone will be bound to you. If you put it in your pocket, it will seem to disappear, but it will always be there when you need it. If anyone but you tries to use it without your permission, it will lock itself and go completely dead."

"Does it do anything magical? I mean, like stuff a regular phone can't do?" Paul asked curiously.

"A few things, but most of that happens in the background so you won't notice it."

"So it's just like a regular cell phone?"

"Yes. Except that you have virtually unlimited service coverage, memory and battery life."

"That sounds really great. But I guess that I was thinking that it would be more 'witchy' somehow." Paul said honestly.

"There are more flamboyant magical modifications that you can make, but most people tire of them quickly once the novelty has worn off. Click the 'app store' icon when you're ready and maybe you'll find something more in line with what you were expecting."

"Okay." Paul easily agreed, then hurried to add, "I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. This is really awesome. Thank you."

"You're very welcome." Harper said with a sincere smile.

"G, did you get Lenn's number? I want to call him before people start showing up for the cookout." Paul said quickly.

"Good idea." G responded, then looked to Harper and asked, "Is that all that you needed Paul for?"

"Yes. All I have left to do is give phones to some people named... Lucky and Star." Harper said after looking at his tablet for their names.

"Hang on, Paul. I want to see Lucky get his." G said seriously.

"Yeah. Me too." Paul agreed, then turned his attention to Harper, waiting for him to continue.

Harper looked at the younger boy, then asked, "Would you like to have your own phone?"

"Yeah. But I'm not sure my mom's gonna let me." Lucky said anxiously.

"Kyla. Is it okay?" D asked simply.

"You've really put me in a spot, D. If I say no, I'll be stuck with two kids who are going to absolutely hate me." Kyla said honestly.

"I wasn't trying to undermine your authority as their mother. But in the short time that Lucky's been here, he's become really close to G and Paul. It would be a shame if he weren't able to stay in touch with them, not only to let them know how he's doing, but also to ask their advice as he gets older." D said reasonably.

"Maybe so, but you should have asked me before you started making decisions that concern my children." Kyla countered.

"Okay. I'm sorry Kyla. I didn't mean to do that, but I suppose I did. Do you want the kids to have the phones or not? Whatever you decide will be the final word on the matter and if the kids end up hating you, I'll do my best to make them

understand that it was my fault for promising to give them something that it wasn't my place to give." D said repentantly.

"I suppose that they *are* just about at that age where it might help with their socialization with their peers."

"So you'll allow it?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead, Harper." D said simply.

After tapping a few icons on his tablet, Harper said, "It's done. I've also added a mild parental lockout on what might be considered 'Hard R' rated materials. There might still be some materials that you'll find objectionable, so you should probably monitor their usage habits. But the lockout will filter out some of the worst examples of obscenity, so you won't have to worry about them stumbling onto the hardcore stuff."

"Thank you. I appreciate that." Kyla said honestly.

"Do you have any questions for me, Lucky?" Harper asked the younger boy gently.

"How can I use it to call someone, like Paul or G?" Lucky asked as he looked at the phone in his hand.

"You don't know how to use a phone?"

"I don't know how to use this one and I don't know anyone's number." Lucky explained.

"Come over here with us, Lucky. We'll get G to show us both and we'll exchange numbers while we're at it." Paul said with a smile.

"Thank you Mr. Harper." Lucky said sincerely before hurrying away.

"Just Harper, my last name is Todd." Harper called after him, but it was wasted effort.

* * * * *

After a few minutes to get their phones up and running, they each found their own phone numbers and, with a little guidance, were able to text them to G.

Once G had their information added to his phone, he in turn sent a variety of contact information to both of them, including D and Lenn's.

"Is there any way we can all talk to Lenn at once?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. We can do a conference call. I do that with Nazzy and Vinda sometimes. It's not too hard." G said honestly.

"Can we do that now? I don't want to miss the chance to call him." Paul asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Let me call Lenn and make sure that he has time to talk. If he can, then I'll set up the conference call with you two." G said seriously.

"You're the alpha." Paul said with a grin.

G smiled with satisfaction at Paul's declaration.

* * * * *

Once G had made the initial call, he called Lucky and Paul on their phones to include them in the conference call.

"Lenn? Are you still there?" G asked uncertainly.

"*Yeah. What's this all about? Is there a problem?*"

"No. Paul just wanted for us to call you and see how you're doing." G quickly explained.

"*I don't know how I'm doing. Things seem to have gone a wee bit strange since you left.*" Lenn said uncertainly.

"Is it anything we can help with?" Paul asked hopefully.

"*I don't know.*" Lenn answered honestly, then explained, "*My dad left us, like he said that he was going to. But a few days ago he called and asked me if I wanted to spend Sunday with him at his new flat. He talked about us going out and doing something together.*"

"What's wrong with that?" G asked curiously.

"It seems dishonest." Paul said before Lenn could respond. "It seems like he's going through the motions because he feels like he has to make up for something."

"*That's right.*" Lenn confirmed. "*If he wanted to spend time with me, why couldn't he have done that before, when he was living with us?*"

There was a long moment of silence before Lucky finally said, "Maybe you should ask him that."

Paul smiled, then said, "Actually, that might be a good idea. Your dad may be able to tell you about his motivations so you'll understand what's really going on."

"Yeah. You probably won't do anything but make yourself miserable if you try to *guess* at what he's thinking. It's kind of a no win situation if you think about it." G added.

"You've got a real dad who's right there, who you can ask. I don't have that. I'd give anything to have that." Lucky said in an uncharacteristic firm voice.

"*Is that really Lucky?*" Lenn asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. Believe it or not." G chuckled.

"*What happened to him?*" Lenn asked cautiously.

"He's growing up, Lenn. I think you should listen to him. He's making sense." Paul said frankly.

"*Yeah. I'll talk to my dad. With the way he is now, it's almost like he's a whole different person than the 'dad' who's been living with us all these years.*"

"Maybe he is. Get to know this new 'dad' and see how he is. Maybe he's someone you can talk to and learn from." Paul said honestly.

"*Yeah. Maybe.*"

"So, besides that, is everything okay?" Paul asked with concern.

"*Yeah. Mom's moodier than usual, but I guess that I can understand that.*" Lenn said unenthusiastically.

"Try to cut her some slack. It's a lot for her to adjust to." Paul said quietly.

"*But the problem is that it's not just her who's going through it. I'm stressed out enough without her hysterics.*" Lenn said honestly.

"You're not doing anything... to ruin your reputation, are you?" Paul tried to discreetly ask.

"*No. But I've thought about it a few times. I felt like if I could get that little thrill, even just for a minute, that it'd take some of the pressure off and make things better.*" Lenn quietly admitted.

"It wouldn't. Trust me. If you give into it, even once, it'll draw you into it that much more." Paul implored him to understand.

"*I know. I haven't done it, I've just thought about it.*" Lenn said calmly.

"Good. Just remember that if it gets too bad, you can call and talk to us. We'll always be happy to talk to you and we'll do whatever we can to help you get through it." Paul said seriously.

"*I know. You said that before... I guess that I wasn't sure you meant it until just now. I mean, you called just to see how I was doing, right?*"

"Yes. That's the only reason." Paul confirmed.

"Paul wanted to call you last night, but Dad said that it would be after midnight there, so we put off calling until this morning." G informed him.

"And Uncle D got us new cell phones, he got me one too." Lucky added.

"That's right. Just as soon as Paul and Lucky got their phones, I called you so we could have a conference call." G explained.

"I'm still having trouble believing that Lucky is old enough to hang with us... I mean, I still think of him as a little kid." Lenn said honestly.

"He's starting to grow up, so G and I are doing our best to help him do it the right way. Maybe, if you wanted, you could help him too."

"*How could **I** help him?*" Lenn asked dubiously.

"We've all made mistakes and learned from them. We can give him advice based on what we've been through and help him deal with things the right way when he makes his own unique mistakes." Paul said honestly.

"Think about it Lenn, you'd be doing something for someone else who needs it. I can't think of anything better to help you get your mind off your own situation." G said thoughtfully.

"*Well, I **have** made more than my share of mistakes... and I **have** learned some lessons.*" Lenn finally agreed.

"Good. I think G is the only one who has everyone's numbers. He can pass that around to all of us so that we'll all be able to keep in touch." Paul said decisively.

G nodded in his direction.

"We're going to have to go soon. D planned a big cookout today and we still have some things to do to get ready for that. But remember that you can call any of us at any time. That's not just if you're feeling like doing something stupid. You can call us when you're sad or... happy even. If you hear a good joke and you want to share it with us, that's okay. We want to hear from you."

"*I understand what you're saying, but why do you care so much?*" Lenn asked curiously.

"I guess it's probably because I've never had any family to care about before. *You're* my family. I care about what happens to you and I want what's best for you." Paul said thoughtfully.

"*I don't think everyone has the same idea of family that you do, but don't worry about that. I like your idea better. Let's go with that.*" Lenn said with a smile carrying through the connection.

"You can count on it, Lenn." Paul assured him.

"Dad's giving us dirty looks, I'm guessing that there's work for us to do." G announced.

"*Go enjoy your cookout. Let me know how it turns out.*" Lenn said wistfully.

"Expect at least one of us to call you tomorrow." Paul said warmly, then regretfully added, "Goodbye."

"*Goodbye.*"

* * * * *

When Paul carried a flat of hamburger buns out to the back porch, he was astounded to find that it was empty, or at least devoid of ice chests.

"Stack them over there. Hurry, we've got about a hundred bags of chips too." G said as he followed with another flat of buns.

"Where did the ice chests go?" Paul began to ask when he was interrupted.

"Someone... take this..." Lucky gasped as he struggled onto the back porch with his arms more than fully loaded.

Paul and G both hurried to unburden themselves so that they could help their younger cousin.

Before Paul could ask any more questions, they were all hurrying away to get another load.

* * * * *

At the sound of the doorbell, the three boys shared an uncertain look, all silently asking the same unvoiced question. '*Did we remember to do everything that we were supposed to?*'

G was the first to commit to an action, but the other two immediately followed his lead.

'*I guess that's why he's the alpha.*'

Once again, D made his way to the door before the boys did.

"Nishith, I'm so glad you could make it!" D said delightedly as G, Paul and Lucky approached the door.

From the man's age and coloring, Paul made the immediate assumption that he must be Vinda's father.

"Nishith, Anaya, please come in!" D said warmly.

"It's always such a pleasure to visit. Revindra told us that your wedding was a lovely affair. Thank you so much for taking her with you. It meant the world to her for you to include her." Anaya said gratefully.

"I did my best to make the wedding not just about me and Beth, but to also include the boys. Having their closest friends there to support them seemed like the best

way to do that." D explained, then said to the doorway, "Come on in everyone. Beth is in the parlor."

Paul watched as two young men walked in, followed by Vinda.

"G! Look at you! I swear you must have grown a foot since the last time I saw you!" One of the men said as he walked up to G and pulled him into an unexpected hug.

"That just means that you need to visit more often." G said as he happily returned the hug.

Paul looked at Lucky and was assured to see that he was every bit as lost as Paul was.

"Rohan and Jo Jo, this is my new brother Paul and our cousin, Lucky." G proudly announced as he released Rohan.

"Jo Jo?" Paul couldn't help but ask at the unlikely name.

"Go on through to the parlor and Beth will have some snacks for you to enjoy. I'll join you in a few minutes, I see another car pulling in." D announced.

"Let's see if I can remember where it is." Anaya said uncertainly.

"Don't worry. I'll show you." Vinda said easily and confidently led the way.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Paul quietly asked again, "Jo Jo?"

"His real name is Yakshit." G said simply.

Paul stood and stared for a moment before finally saying, "Jo Jo, got it."

G nodded, then turned his attention to the next group of people walking up to the open front doors.

* * * * *

"Oliver! I'm glad that you were able to make it. Please come in." D said invitingly.

"It's nice to see you again D, especially now that there aren't millions of dollars hanging in the balance." Oliver said happily.

Paul noticed that the woman accompanying him was carrying a strangely shaped case.

"I'd negotiate just as hard for a buck and a quarter." D said frankly.

"I believe that you would." Oliver chuckled, then said, "D, I'd like for you to meet my wife, Lyta, and from what I've heard, you've already met our son, Alexander."

"Yes. Although before now I only heard him referred to by his last name." D said frankly.

"Who knew that there'd be thirty-five other Alexanders attending school with him." Oliver chuckled.

Paul smiled at Karras and noticed that he had a guitar case slung on his back.

"I suppose that my son never had to worry about that." D said with a grin at G.

"They named me Gwayne." G said with an accusing glare at his father, then continued to their guests, "If you'd like to come in, I can show you where the parlor is. I've heard that we're going to have some snacks set out in there."

"Before we do that, Alexander mentioned that we'd be having some mundanes here today. Is that really true?" Oliver asked curiously.

"Yes. They haven't arrived yet." D confirmed.

"This should be interesting. I haven't socialized with mundane people in ages." Oliver said excitedly.

"Their son has befriended my sons, so I invited them. I hope that everyone will end up having a good time."

"The parlor's this way." G said to draw their attention, then turned back to Paul and said more quietly, "I'll be right back."

* * * * *

"You guys might have more fun in the parlor. All I'm going to be doing out here is welcoming people." D said quietly to the boys.

"You might need help." Paul said frankly, then explained, "What if someone needs help carrying something inside? Lucky and I will be here so you can stay here."

"Thank you Paul. I appreciate whatever help I can get..." D began to say, but his attention was drawn by a car pulling in. When he recognized the car, he said, "That's Nazareth and his family."

"I can't wait to meet his parents. With as great as Nazzy is, they must be really awesome." Paul said frankly.

"Jerrell and Regina are... unique, even among witches." D said diplomatically.

"D! What kind of an adventure do you have in store for us this time?" A large unkempt man asked jovially as he approached with his wife and son following closely behind.

To Paul's eyes, with his wealth of 'real world' experience, Jerrell appeared to be almost 'homeless'. He wasn't dirty, but he was so disheveled that it looked like he might have slept in the clothes that he was wearing... possibly for more than one day in a row. His hair was a wild mess that was a month or two past needing to be trimmed.

Paul had always thought of Nazzy as being laid back and easy going, but after meeting Jerrell, Paul had nothing but the utmost respect for Nazzy for being able to 'keep it together' as well as he did.

"Thank you for inviting us, D. With as much as Nazareth likes to eat, it should really be *us* inviting *you* over, to repay you in some small way." Nazzy's mother, Regina, said pleasantly.

She appeared to be nothing short of 'average'. Not thin or fat, not tall or short. Not beautiful or plain. Even looking right at her, it was as though she blended into the background and not in an exciting 'magical' way, like Lenn might do.

"His appreciation of the food and his good company are more than enough payment for everything. Speaking of which, if you'll go on through to the parlor, Beth should have some snacks set out for you to enjoy." D said warmly.

"Come on. I know where it is." Nazzy said quickly.

"If there's food laid out, that boy is like a bloodhound." Jerrell said before following his wife and son down the hallway.

"He's a witch?" Paul asked D dubiously.

"There are witches of all shapes and sizes." D confirmed, not having to be told to whom Paul was referring.

"He's big!" Lucky said quietly.

"Yes. But he's one of the most gentle, loving men that you'll ever meet. I'm willing to bet that before the end of the day you'll have had at least one of his 'bear' hugs. He especially loves children." D said with a smile.

"We're not late, are we?" A woman asked from the driveway as she stepped out of a car.

Paul hadn't noticed the car pull in and was surprised to see the family. They were some of the blondest, blue-eyed people Paul had ever seen. They were like the poster children for 'white'. It wasn't until the back seat driver's side door opened that Paul realized who they were.

Filipe spotted Paul in the doorway and waved enthusiastically.

"You're right on time. Please, all of you, come in." D graciously invited.

"I hope that this is okay. Filipe told us that we were invited to a cookout but... we're supposed to be here, right?" The woman asked uncertainly.

"Yes. That's exactly what's going on. We're all meeting here, then we're going to travel to the lake to have a cookout. If any of you have musical instruments, you

might want to bring them in. We probably won't be coming back out here before we leave." D said pleasantly.

"Yes. We brought them." The woman said quickly, then turned to her husband and said, "Get the musical instruments out of the trunk.

He nodded once, then motioned for Filipe to go with him.

"We haven't been introduced. My name is Junette Beckingham. That was my husband Morgan, this young lady at my side is Sarah Anne, although she insists on being called Stevie, and I believe that you already know Filipe."

"I know *of* him. My son Paul..." D paused as he indicated Paul at his side, "...has a class with Filipe, and when we started planning a cookout, he asked that Filipe be invited."

"It's so wonderful that Filipe has started to make friends. It's been difficult for him being in a new town and starting a new school. Not that he'd complain, mind you, but I could tell that the pressure was weighing on him." Junette said regretfully.

Before Filipe and Morgan could make their way to the front door, another car pulled in.

"That's Curtis." Paul said when he spotted Curtis in the back seat of the car.

"He's the non-witch?" Junette asked in a whisper.

"Yes. I hope that isn't a problem." D responded.

"Not at all. I think it should be an interesting way to spend the day, and it'll be good for Stevie to have an opportunity to exercise her self-restraint." Junette said pleasantly.

"Mom!" Stevie said in offense.

Morgan and Filipe walked over to Curtis' family as they got out of the car and the group of them walked to the front door together.

"Hello. Welcome to my home. My name is Aloysius Darroch, please call me D. If anyone has any musical instruments, please bring them with you, we'll be leaving for the lake in a few minutes and we probably won't be coming back out here." D said to the group, half of whom were assembled just outside the door.

"We don't play any instruments, I hope that's okay." Curtis' father said uncertainly.

"That's fine. I just wanted to give those who played a chance to participate." D assured him.

"Mr. D, this is my dad, Steve and my mom, Kim." Curtis said carefully, obviously trying to correctly do a formal introduction.

"No Mr., just D. And it's a pleasure to meet all of you. Steve and Kim, this is Morgan and Junette and their children Stevie and Filipe."

Everyone started shaking hands and saying how nice it was to meet each other when another car pulled in.

"That's Dex!" Paul said happily.

"Unless I'm mistaken, these are the last of our invited guests. If you'll hold on for just another moment, we'll all go inside and get this party started." D said with a smile.

Paul couldn't resist the urge and ran past the people gathered in the doorway.

"Dex! I'm glad you could make it!" Paul said happily.

"When I told my parents, they kinda... well, let's just say that there was no backing out of it." Dex admitted shyly.

Paul laughed, then said, "Come on in. You're right on time and we're about to get started."

Dex looked to see that his parents had gotten out of the car, then reluctantly started toward the door.

"Did you bring your violin?" Paul asked suddenly when he noticed that Dex wasn't carrying anything.

"No. I forgot it." Dex shyly admitted.

"It's in the boot. I thought that you'd forget." Dex's father announced with a smile.

Dex sent a withering look in his father's direction, then dutifully walked to the back of the car to get his violin case.

"It's going to be great. I promise." Paul said quietly.

Dex shot him a dubious look, then collected his violin case and closed the trunk.

"Come into the house and meet everyone, then we can get going." Paul said happily.

Dex silently followed along with his family and looked distinctly uneasy.

* * * * *

"Dex, will you introduce your family to everyone?" Paul asked as soon as they were inside.

"Yeah. This is my dad, Jai and my mom, Pam." Dex mumbled.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." D said warmly, then continued, "Jai and Pam, I'd like you to meet Steve and Kim and their son Curtis. We also have Morgan and Junette

and their kids, Stevie and Filipe. Everyone, this is Jai and Pam and their son Dex. Please come in. Let's get this party started!"

* * * * *

"You really live here? This place is incredible!" Curtis said as they walked down the hallway toward the parlor.

"Yeah, well I've only lived here a few weeks, so I haven't seen all of it yet. So far everything's been amazing." Paul said frankly, then noticed an arm tentatively snaking its way around his waist.

Paul glanced down at Lucky and could see the fearful expression. He automatically draped an arm around Lucky's shoulders and gave him a quick squeeze to assure him as they walked.

"Your house is so far off the road that I've never seen it before. I'm glad that we're finally getting to see it." Jai said casually.

"It's big. But there's not anything remarkable about it otherwise. If I were going to do it all over again, I'd probably seek out an up-and-coming architect with some original ideas." D said frankly.

"Where's G?" Filipe asked Paul quietly.

"I think he's probably in the parlor. Him and Nazzy and Vinda probably got to talking and forgot about us." Paul said with a smile, obviously not bothered by the idea.

"So is everyone here, everyone from our table in the cafeteria?" Curtis asked as he continued to look around, trying to absorb every detail of their surroundings.

"Yeah. Everyone made it. I think this is going to be great." Paul said as they walked as a group into the parlor.

* * * * *

"Everyone. I know that it might be awkward for a moment, being around so many people that you don't know, but we're going to have plenty of time to introduce ourselves on the trip to the lake. If you'd like a snack or a drink, please help yourselves." D said to the group.

"If you'd like to freshen up before we leave, the restroom is next door on the right." Paul's mom added helpfully.

Paul noticed that Curtis' mom, Kim, immediately took that opportunity to slip out the door and was glad that his mom had thought to mention that.

G, Nazzy, Karras and Vinda were grouped beside the snack table with Nazzy doing his best to snag bites to eat without looking like a pig about it.

Paul couldn't help but smile at the sight of Nazzy's father, Jerrell, sidling up to the snack table to do much the same as his son.

To Paul's surprise, it appeared as though Star had unabashedly approached Stevie and already struck up a conversation.

Although Stevie was a few years older, she seemed to be interested in what Star had to say and the two of them appeared to be on their way to becoming fast friends.

Paul glanced to D to see if he had any other instructions for them, but found him deep in concentration. The expression on D's face reminded Paul of D's contribution to the festivities at the family Halloween gathering, following the wedding.

Although he appeared just to be staring off into space, Paul was fairly certain that D was performing some intense and complicated magic.

"Where is your room? Do we have time to see it before we go?" Filipe asked Paul curiously.

"Not really. Normally it's not too far from here, but they're doing construction right now and they closed off the bridge, so we'd have to walk outside and around the house to get there. If you'll remind me, we'll stop by there when we get back."

"Bridge?" Filipe asked curiously.

Paul couldn't help but smile at his reaction, then said, "Yeah. You're not going to believe it."

When Kim returned to the parlor, D seemed to snap out of his magical daze and loudly asked, "Is everyone ready?"

There were uncertain murmurs, mostly because no one knew what was supposed to happen next.

"Parents, keep an eye on your kids. We don't want to leave anyone behind." D said as he led the way out the door.

"What are we doing?" Dex asked nervously.

"I guess we're all going to find out together." Paul said honestly.

* * * * *

As they passed through the back porch, Paul noticed that everything that they had loaded out there earlier was gone.

He had suspected as much, but was still resolved himself to ask about it later, when they didn't have guests.

When D led them out the back door and started across the expansive grassy field, Paul knew *exactly* where they were going.

Although it had occurred to him when D mentioned that they were going to the lake, Paul wasn't sure that that was what he had meant.

"How far is the lake from here?" Filipe asked curiously.

"I don't know. I've never been there." Paul said honestly.

"Do you think it's really far away? I don't think my host parents do a lot of hiking." Filipe said with concern.

"I don't think we'll be walking the whole way. If I'm right, we should only have to walk as far as that next rise." Paul said as he pointed ahead of them.

"Does anyone need help carrying their musical instruments?" G asked as he joined the group.

"I forgot my clarinet!" Paul said suddenly.

"Don't worry. I grabbed it and put it on the porch with my keyboard. It's packed in with the other supplies." G assured him.

"Oh, good. After D went to all the trouble of getting it for me, I didn't want to disappoint him." Paul said honestly.

"Don't worry. It's covered." G said with a smile as he gave Paul a quick hug.

"So you're like this at home too?" Curtis asked curiously.

"How's that?" G asked in response.

"You guys hug and stuff at school, but I wasn't sure if you'd be that way in front of your parents too." Curtis said honestly.

"Yeah. I mean, we tone it down in front of them, but we don't hide it." G said simply.

"I think that even if I had a *girlfriend* that I'd be shy about showing it in front of my parents."

"Practice makes perfect." G quipped, then added, "I think Paul was a little shy about it at first, but he got over it fairly quickly."

"I was kinda freaked out by everything happening all at once. I mean, the new dad, new house, new brother... I guess I needed someone to hold me. G did. It was worth working past a little shyness just to have him there to help me deal with everything."

"Somehow I got the feeling that you were so strong that you didn't need anyone's help." Filipe said honestly.

"I can be strong when I have to be. But when everything gets too big for me to handle on my own, I have G to face it with me. We're stronger together." Paul said honestly.

Before anyone could respond, they crested the rise and the 'Train Station' came into view.

The enormous building appeared to be closed up, and an engine was on the track with several cars hitched up behind. There was already smoke pouring out of the smokestack and from all appearances, the train seemed to be ready to board.

"You have your own *train*?" Curtis asked in amazement.

"Yeah. I couldn't believe it either." Paul chuckled.

"Before we go, I'm going to need a couple people to help me feed wood into the boiler. Do I have any volunteers?" D asked loudly and seemed to be mostly focused on Paul and his group.

"Go ahead. It's a lot of fun." G encouraged their friends.

"Yeah. I'll go." Filipe immediately volunteered.

"Me too." Curtis chirped.

Paul watched with a smile as the two boys hurried ahead to join D at the front.

"Lucky, I'm going to need you up front with me. You'll be my assistant engineer." D called out seriously.

Lucky smiled and immediately left Paul's side to join D.

Karras appeared to be torn by the decision, but after a quiet exchange of words with Nazzy, he gave Nazzy his guitar, then sprinted to join D's group.

"How much fun is it *really* to add the wood to the fire?" Paul asked curiously as they continued to walk.

"Let's just say that by the time we reach the lake, they'll probably be over it." G said with a grin.

"Thought so." Paul chuckled.

* * * * *

When the group finally reached the train, D took his group to the engine to get them started on their work.

As they approached the train, Paul couldn't help but notice that G's calliope was serving as a caboose.

G seemed to fall into the 'leader' role and led the rest of their group to the passenger car of the train.

"Climb aboard and make yourselves comfortable. It'll be a few minutes before the engine's built up enough steam to get us moving, so enjoy the peace and quiet while you can." G called out.

"This is incredible. When we were invited to a cookout, I never imagined something like this." Curtis' mom, Kim, said in wonder.

"We just live down the road from here, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that they'd have something like this." Dex's father, Jai, responded.

"Dad and I usually lead a simple life. This is the one big thing that he's done 'just because he can'." G explained.

"It's important to enjoy the fruits of your labors. When you think of all the excesses that one could indulge in, this is one of the more harmless and enjoyable options." Dex's mother, Pam, said thoughtfully.

"You sound knowledgeable on the subject." Nazzy's mother, Regina, observed.

"I'm a cultural anthropologist. I've seen several examples of the reaction to having access to wealth. It's natural for people to indulge in frivolous things and lose their impulse control. But I have the feeling that this is something more productive."

"How are you guys doing?" One of Vinda's brothers, Rohan, asked, breaking Paul's attention away from the mothers.

"This is as new to me as it is to everyone else. I'm just doing my best to take it all in." Paul said honestly.

"Just don't get so caught up in the train that you forget to look out the window. The scenery along the way is incredible. In fact, I brought my camera, just in case this is what we were going to do." Rohan said as he held up the camera hanging around his neck as evidence.

Paul noticed that the camera was of high quality and couldn't help but ask, "Are you a photographer?"

"Yes. But my professional work mostly involves models in a studio. Occasionally we'll go on location to do a shoot. But I don't often get an opportunity to enjoy and appreciate natural beauty like this."

"Can't you just put down the camera and enjoy it?" G asked curiously.

"With my camera, I'll be able to enjoy it in more than just in my memories."

"It kinda makes me wish that I'd thought to bring a camera... if I had one." Paul finished quietly.

"Your phone has a camera, and I'm betting that it's a little better than average. Maybe if you take a few minutes to figure out how it works, you could snap a few pictures along the way." G casually suggested.

"Yeah! I hadn't thought of that." Paul said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. "And I'd really like to take pictures of everyone so that later we can look back at when we were all able to get together at once."

"It sounds like you've got your plan." G said with a tender smile at him.

"Thanks Rohan. If you hadn't brought it up, I might have missed this opportunity." Paul said appreciatively.

"Glad to help." Rohan said with a genuine smile.

* * * * *

Once they were all aboard and waiting for the train to start moving, Paul turned to G and quietly asked, "Where's all the stuff that we packed?"

"In one of the box cars. We'll unload it when we get to the lake."

Paul nodded, then noticed that Vinda, Stevie and Star had formed their own little 'girls' group.

When G noticed, he quietly said, "Don't worry about Vinda. Even though she doesn't act like it, she can hang with the 'girly' girls when she wants to."

"Really? I'm so comfortable around her, I've just started thinking of her as one of the guys." Paul said honestly.

"Yeah. But I think it's good for her to get away from the guys every now and then. She's a complex person and it keeps her from getting into a rut." G said thoughtfully.

"That's something that I've noticed about Nazzy and Vinda, they don't fit into a mold. They're always themselves no matter what anyone else thinks about it."

"To a point. It's possible to take that too far. But I think they've found a pretty good balance."

"Where is Nazzy, anyway?"

"Talking to Dex." G said as he pointed.

"Should we rescue Dex from him?"

"Nah. Nazzy's like his dad. They might come off as a little pushy at first, but they're both very aware of it and won't push too far."

"Okay. And from what I've seen of Dex, he could probably use a little push." Paul finished with a smile.

Paul noticed his mother looking at them disapprovingly and got the feeling that she would appreciate a little help keeping their guests entertained.

'*Oh well. Sucks to be her.*'

'*No adult's going to want a kid monopolizing the conversation.*'

'*If the kids are all happy, my work here is done.*'

Before Beth could find a way to draw Paul into the conversation, an incredibly loud steam whistle sounded.

G immediately stood and said, "We're going to be leaving in just a few minutes. Everyone needs to make sure that anything you brought with you is either put away, or somewhere it isn't going to fall over when we start moving."

A few of the musical instruments were moved off seats and onto the floor. Otherwise everyone seemed to be sitting and looking out the windows with anticipation.

"Vinda's told us all about you and says that you're adjusting to things pretty well." Jo Jo said conversationally, then asked, "Have you convinced yourself that it isn't a dream yet?"

"Yeah. In fact, I think that the first time I heard a steam whistle really did it for me." Paul said honestly.

"Because you couldn't dream of a sound that loud?" Jo Jo guessed.

"That, and because I wasn't expecting it. The shock of something that loud would have jolted me awake."

Two short blasts of the train whistle sounded, interrupting all conversation.

"That means that it's up to full pressure and that we're ready to leave. Take your seats!" G called loudly.

Jo Jo walked across the aisle and took a seat next to his brother, Rohan.

A few people looked around them to verify that their belongings were secure, but then settled into place.

G walked forward and hung out the door by one arm as he made a grand waving gesture with the other.

A moment later, the train started moving.

As G returned to Paul's side, he said, "I think Lucky was the one to blow the whistle the last time."

"How can you tell?"

"Dad usually sounds it in longer bursts."

"I bet Lucky's having a great time."

"Yeah. I'm glad that dad's paying special attention to him. It may not be as good as having a real father all his own, but it's still pretty good."

"Yeah. Even when he has to leave, he'll be able to carry this memory with him. I think it'll be enough to keep him on the right path." Paul said thoughtfully.

The train strained and lurched forward, struggling to gain momentum.

Everyone in the passenger car was silent as they looked out the windows.

"I love this." G said with a smile, then explained, "All the stuff we usually worry about doesn't matter here. There's no schedule or work waiting to be done. Today is all about relaxing with friends and family and just enjoying life for a little while."

"You're going to have to show me how to do that. I don't think I've ever done it before."

"Don't worry. I've got this. I'm the alpha."

* * * * *

Paul noticed that Rohan had his window lowered and was snapping picture after picture as the train ambled along at a comfortable pace.

The adults were beginning to talk to each other and seemed to be forming into groups.

Nishith and Jerrell seemed to have taken it upon themselves to keep the other fathers entertained. All the 'dads' had discretely moved so that they could talk quietly together.

Likewise, the women seemed to have formed their own little collective and were chatting amiably. Although Paul couldn't be certain, he got the sense that his mother's pregnancy was the primary topic of discussion.

Paul couldn't help but wonder what Vinda, Stevie and Star were chattering about. But they seemed to be happy, so he was just as happy to leave them be.

Nazzy and Dex had stopped talking and were just looking at the scenery passing by. It also appeared that Jo Jo had been left on his own, being significantly younger than the 'dads' but older than the 'high schoolers'.

"I see it." G said before Paul could even begin to form a plan.

"What should we do?" Paul asked, trusting that they were on the same wavelength.

"Let's just talk to them and see what happens. If we all end up talking together, great. If not, that's still okay."

"I'm on it." Paul assured him, then walked toward Jo Jo to do his best to make the young man feel included.

* * * * *

Paul ended up sitting by Jo Jo and talking comfortably.

Vinda's older brother was a quiet and evenly tempered young man.

When Paul showed interest, Jo Jo shared details about his life and expressed his passion for travel. He was currently enrolled in college, seeking his master's degree and had not yet been able to indulge his passion and see the world.

Although Paul didn't have the same aspirations, he could see the appeal of what Jo Jo had in mind. He also respected Jo Jo's level headedness in choosing to complete his education before striking off on his first adventure.

When the train started slowing down, Paul looked out the window to see if they had arrived.

The scenery was absolutely beautiful, but there was no indication of a lake nearby.

"We're just switching tracks. Give it a minute and we'll be on the move again." G announced loudly.

A movement drew Paul's attention and he just barely caught a glimpse of Karras and Curtis running at full speed alongside the track ahead of them.

Although he didn't know *exactly* what was involved in switching tracks, he could imagine that Curtis and Karras were probably having the time of their lives.

"I've got soft drinks and water here for anyone who's thirsty." G said as he pushed an old-style serving cart up the aisle.

Even though G pretended to be so laid back, when it came time for something to be done, he did it.

Paul watched as G went from group to group, handing out drinks.

The train whistle sounded in one long burst.

"We'll be moving again in just a minute." G warned as he increased his pace, handing out drinks, so that everyone could get some before they were once again underway.

Paul accepted a bottle of water from G, then watched as he passed by, determinedly making his way to the back of the passenger car.

'*Epic ass.*'

'*Even if I didn't love him, I'd lust after him.*'

'*I love my life.*'

G had finished doing whatever he needed to do to secure the cart before the two short bursts of the whistle sounded.

Less than a minute later, they were underway again, chugging toward their destination.

* * * * *

Paul wasn't much of one for looking at scenery.

He would look, appreciate the view, then move on. He wasn't the type of person who could stand enthralled while watching a sunset.

For the first time in his life he could understand a little of what that type of person felt.

They moved through a stand of trees into a valley that was so beautiful that it was almost magical.

The train didn't stop, but *did* seem to slow, allowing all the passengers to take in the breathtaking beauty of the scene.

From that point on, there was little conversation on the train.

Everyone seemed to be more focused on each new scene of beauty as they proceeded.

Three short bursts of the whistle caught Paul's attention.

"We're here." G announced.

The train was still moving, but before Paul could question G's words, they emerged from a little canyon and were faced with an incredibly beautiful lake.

Paul was surprised to see a building in the distance and it took him a moment to identify it as a little train platform.

For some reason Paul had thought that when they arrived at 'the lake' that it would just be unspoiled nature.

Instead, there was the train platform and a couple other buildings nearby.

"The wind off the lake can make it chilly, so remember to take your coats with you. If you didn't bring one, we have plenty of coats and blankets at the stationhouse." G announced to the otherwise silent passengers.

"This is incredible." Morgan finally said.

"Yeah. From what dad told me, he had to decide between a train set or a racetrack. I think he made the right choice." G said with a grin.

"You're kidding." Jai said dubiously.

"Probably." G said impishly.

* * * * *

As soon as everyone was off the train and gathered on the platform, G loudly announced, "There are restrooms available in the train station. We'll have drinks and snacks put out in a few minutes in the pavilion, right over there. There are benches over by the fire pit and in the amphitheater, over that way."

Paul did his best to remember G's directions, but was overwhelmed by the astounding scenery surrounding them.

"Uncle D let me blow the whistle! Did you hear me?" Lucky asked as he ran up to Paul and G.

"Yes I did. And G said that he knew that it was you." Paul said with a smile at the boy's excitement.

"Uncle D was showing Filipe how to drive the train and even let him do it himself for a few minutes." Lucky said breathlessly.

"Really? I haven't had the chance to do that yet." Paul said playfully.

"Filipe's really nice. I gave him my phone number so that we can talk after I have to go home." Lucky said earnestly.

"That's a great idea. Hopefully you'll get a few more numbers before you leave."

Paul wasn't sure if Lucky had taken that as an order or just thought it was a good idea. Either way, he took off running to hurry and talk to someone else.

* * * * *

"What do we do now?" Paul asked uncertainly as he looked around.

"We wait for Dad to release the pressure on the steam engine. Once he's done that, there's no chance of the train lurching forward, so we'll be able to start unloading the boxcar." G said seriously.

"How long is that going to take?" Paul asked cautiously.

"It shouldn't take too long with all the help we brought with us. I figure that us kids can do it. Beth can probably organize anyone who wants to help with setting up the buffet while Dad gets everyone else to help him at the grill." G said seriously.

"Is there anything we can do right now?"

"Yeah. Start gathering everyone to help us unload. If you ask Vinda, she'll probably be able to talk the other girls into helping. Rohan and Jo Jo shouldn't need any convincing. And I think that if you'll tell Nazzy what's going on, he can help you

recruit everyone else. Remember to tell them that the sooner we have it unloaded, the sooner they'll get to eat."

"Okay. Where are you going to be?"

"At the boxcar. As soon as Dad releases the pressure, I'll open the door. When I do, I'm going to be counting on you to help me. We'll organize stuff and scoot it to the door, then tell people where it goes as they pick it up."

"Okay. I'm on it." Paul said confidently as he walked away, going directly for the nearest group of his peers.

* * * * *

G's expertise at organizing and unloading proved to be invaluable. Every tray of buns, every sack of chips and many many ice chests were transported and delivered directly to where they were needed.

As G had said, Beth had assembled all those interested in helping in the kitchen and put them to work laying out a feast of snacks to tide people over.

As soon as D was finished settling the train engine, he took up his duties as grillmaster and enlisted the aid of any and all who cared to join him.

* * * * *

Once everything had been distributed to where it needed to be, people started visiting the snack buffet. Paul and G took their turns and talked to a few of their guests on general topics as they enjoyed their food.

"I think that now is a good time for us to get everyone together and go for a little hike." G said casually.

Paul looked at the beautiful scenery surrounding them and thought that it sounded like an excellent idea.

He walked with G as he stopped to talk to different groups to invite them along.

In the end, their little group consisted of all their classmates with the exception of Stevie and Vinda, who wanted to stay behind to talk with Star. Lucky wasn't available since he was being given expert instruction in the fine art of grilling by D.

Rohan and Jo Jo easily accepted the invitation and Rohan actually seemed to be somewhat excited by the prospect.

As they started walking, Nazzy and Dex made their way to the front of the pack so that they could talk to G for a few minutes.

Paul wasn't interested in their conversation, so he lagged behind a little so that he could talk with Karras and Curtis.

"So, what do you think? Are you having a good time?" Paul asked with a smile.

"Yeah. This is incredible. It's so beautiful out here." Curtis said happily.

"I think so too." Paul easily agreed.

"When did life get so complicated that going outside and going for a walk became impossible?" Karras asked thoughtfully.

"I can't speak for anyone else, but since I started at the Arcadia Academy all I've been able to do is try to catch up. I don't have time to do anything besides school work and studying." Paul said honestly.

"It's a hard school, but it's good too." Karras said seriously.

"Yeah. But there's something weird about it." Curtis interjected.

"What's that?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I'm not sure yet. It just seems like there's something going on... I don't know what it is, but it's like I can *almost*see it." Curtis said slowly.

Paul exchanged a wary look with Karras before carefully asking, "Have you noticed anything strange going on? Maybe we can help you figure it out."

"It's like... all the teachers are so *nice*. That's just not normal." Curtis fought to explain.

"I wouldn't call all of my teachers *nice*, exactly. Some of them are, but there are others who seem really passionate or dedicated. I like all of them because even if they're strict or formal, I know that they really care if I'm learning or not." Paul said carefully.

"Yeah. 'Nice' isn't exactly the right word, but I guess what I'm saying is that none of the teachers are mean or lazy or just so zoned out that they don't care anymore." Curtis said thoughtfully.

"That sounds about right. I think I could say that about all my teachers." Karras agreed.

"But I still think that there's something else going on. It's like they're up to something when no one is looking." Curtis persisted.

"Like what?" Paul asked curiously.

"I know it sounds silly, but have you ever watched X-Men?" Curtis hesitantly asked.

"I've seen it." Paul slowly answered.

"I don't know what it is, but you know how in those movies that the teachers are all secretly superheroes... it feels something like that." Curtis said with difficulty, having trouble finding an adequate way to articulate his idea.

"I know *just* what you mean..." Paul began to say when he noticed Karras' warning look.

Regardless, Paul continued on, "My science teacher, Mr. Hind, I'm pretty sure he's a ninja."

"Why do you think that?" Curtis asked curiously.

"I don't know if I've ever seen him walk into a room. He just seems to appear, out of nowhere, right behind me. He scares the crap out of me every single time he does that." Paul said frankly.

"You know, Mrs. Ka'ana'ana is like that too. She'll just seem to appear out of nowhere." Karras interjected.

"What does she teach?" Curtis asked curiously.

"Literature. The really cool thing is, she picks traditional stories from all over the world. There was this one thing she had us read where I spent almost as much time researching the different cultural customs and Polynesian words as I did reading the story. It turned out to be fascinating."

"I just don't know..." Curtis trailed off as his eyes got wide.

Paul followed his stare and was also reduced to a speechless state.

The unspoiled beauty of the scene before them had caused the entire group to stop in their tracks.

When Paul noticed Rohan snapping pictures, he hurried to get his phone out so he could take a few pictures for himself.

"That's a good idea." Curtis whispered as he took out his own phone.

"I never knew that places like this really existed. It's like something from a fairy tale." Karras said in amazement.

"Yeah. I spent my whole life never realizing that stories like that were based on someone's real life." Paul said as he turned his phone so that he could catch a picture of Karras and Curtis.

"How do you mean?" Curtis asked curiously.

Karras appeared to be one wrong answer away from jumping on Paul and holding his mouth shut.

"To me, those stories were always just fantasy. I thought that they were all completely made up. But looking at something like this, it makes me realize that those people were telling stories about their homes and their lives. Hansel and Gretel, the huntsman, the seven dwarves... even if there was fantasy in their

stories, some of the elements of those stories were from real life. This little... I don't know what you call this, a glen? A glade?"

"Whatever." Karras said simply.

Paul nodded, then continued, "A place like this makes me understand that there's a whole world right in front of me that I've never bothered to see."

"Does this have something to do with what we were talking about with school?" Curtis asked cautiously.

"I don't know. Maybe." Paul said uncertainly, then continued more decisively, "But until I have a better answer, I'm just going to assume that they're all ninjas."

Curtis laughed at his answer, then said, "I guess that'll work until I have a more reasonable explanation."

Paul glanced at Karras with a smile of accomplishment.

* * * * *

As luck would have it, the hikers returned to the cookout just as the first hamburgers were coming off the grill.

Paul wasn't sure who had done it, but he was surprised to see that all the musical instruments had been relocated to the amphitheater.

All the moms and dads appeared to be in good cheer, talking and joking amongst themselves.

The mundane guests, the witches and those in-between had a great time enjoying the good food and good company.

All in all, it was magical.

The End

Parvenu 4: Trilogy

4.1: Bacaidhean

Chapter 1

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 2

"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 3

"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."

* * * * *

"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 4

"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 5

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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 6

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.

* * * * *

"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 7

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 8

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.

* * * * *

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 9

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 10

"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 11

"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 12

"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 13

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.

* * * * *

"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."

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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 14

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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 15

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 16

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 17

"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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

4.2: Nevermore

Chapter 18

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 19

"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.

* * * * *

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 20

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.

* * * * *

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."

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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."

* * * * *

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 21

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 22

"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 23

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 24

"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 25

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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

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 26

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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 27

"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 descendants 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 28

"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 29

"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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

"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.

Chapter 30

"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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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 31

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."

4.3: Unsung

Chapter 32

"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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

"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 33

"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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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 34

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

"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 35

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

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 36

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

"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 em massing.

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 37

"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."

* * * * *

"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 38

"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 39

"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.

* * * * *

"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 40

"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 41

"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 42

"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 43

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 44

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

Chapter 45

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

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."

Parvenu 5: Sun & Air / Son & Heir

Chapter 1

"You can't be serious." Paul said wearily.

"You were included in the project as part of a work-study program. Now that the project is complete, you have to go back to school." D calmly explained.

"I don't have a problem with that, but why can't we get a day or two off before we go back? I'm wiped out." Paul said quietly, revealing just how tired he really was.

"No one would miss us if we didn't show up tomorrow. I mean, it's Friday, that's the day you finish things off, not start them up." G reasoned in support of his brother.

"I don't think you understand just how important this is." D countered.

Paul looked into the back seat quizzically and found two equally bewildered expressions looking back at him.

"As far as I know, we're going back to school. Is there more to it than that?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yes." D said without prevarication, "Quite a bit more, that is, if you play your cards right."

"As tired as I am, I have a feeling that what you're about to tell us is something that I'm not going to want to do." Paul said hesitantly.

"Probably not... at least, not at first. But I'm hoping you'll see the wisdom in it and decide to go along with it anyway." D said frankly.

"Okay. Just lay it on me. How bad is it?" Paul asked with weary acceptance.

"When your group was chosen, it was because you had the skills and potential to do a difficult job. Right?" D asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah. And we deserve to get extra credit for the amount of scope creep. If we knew going in that we were going to have to completely recast *three* completely different barriers based in three different elements, I think all of us would have said 'no'." Paul said bluntly.

"That has very little to do with what I'm talking about." D calmly informed him.

"What *are* you talking about?" G interjected.

"The group was chosen. You accepted. You went. You succeeded. That's all that most people will know about your mission." D said informatively.

"I guess since it's such a big secret, that's all they *can* know. Anything we tell anyone has the potential to hurt the Wudewas, the Nephilim and the Brynns." Paul said somberly.

"Right. So how do you think anyone, students *or* teachers, are going to judge how you performed during your work-study?" D once again prompted.

"They'll watch us when we come back for any clues on how it went." G said immediately.

"If you go to school tomorrow and do your best to get through the day, you'll not only get yourselves back on track to start the new school week on Monday, but you will have shown everyone that you're capable of completing a job and following through on a commitment without wimping out or whining. Later on, when one of your professors is called upon to recommend their former students, something like this could tip things in your favor." D said earnestly.

"Here all this time I thought having a dad would be about piggyback rides and learning to ride a bike. I never thought you'd be giving me business advice." Paul said with a smile that was verging on breaking into a chuckle.

"As far as I'm concerned, being a dad means passing on the things that I was taught as a kid, as well as the things that I learned on my own since."

"Am I going to have to go to school?" Lex cautiously interrupted.

"Of course." D said without hesitation.

"But how can he? The school is going to want birth certificates and social security numbers and stuff, aren't they?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Do you think that Lex is the first elemental who was accidentally conjured in the field? Not only will the school *accept* him, but since it was their 'work-study' that was partially responsible for him being brought into being, they're also going to bear some responsibility for getting all his legalities in order." D said firmly.

"But if he's not a real person, why does he have to go to school?" G asked curiously.

"What's a *real* person? Someone you can touch? Because from my point of view he looks pretty real right now." D said seriously.

"Maybe someone who was born is real." Paul said uncertainly.

"In my experience, the circumstance of people's birth's are not only the least important things about them, but are also the most over-used excuses justifying a variety of, frankly, horrible things." D said honestly.

"Sorry, Lex. I'm not trying to say anything bad about you." Paul hurried to explain.

"That's okay. I'm trying to understand, too." Lex said without offense.

"Paul, you're a demon. G is a witch and Lex is an air elemental. Can you honestly tell me one single thing that makes any of you better or worse than the others?" D asked firmly and almost seemed to be angry.

"No. No one's better than anyone else." Paul immediately answered.

"Good. I'm glad you think so. That's over half the battle. Now we just have to convince you that Lex is a real person."

"I remember him when G was making him. I remember how at first he barely looked human..."

"He's *not* human. I'm not asking you to pretend that he's human. He's a formation of elemental magic that's taken on corporeal form." D carefully explained, then added more quietly, "You're not human either."

Paul was obviously jolted with surprise at D's words.

"Please don't say that." Lex urgently asked D, then explained, "I've never thought of myself as human, so reminding me that I'm not doesn't hurt me. I know that Paul grew up thinking that he was human. I can only imagine how it must hurt to be reminded that you're not who you thought you were."

"It doesn't exactly hurt, it mostly just feels weird." Paul reassured his newest brother.

"I'm glad it doesn't hurt you. I wouldn't want that." Lex said, sounding relieved.

"And maybe it *is* because of the way that I was raised that I'm having a little problem accepting who and what you are. It doesn't mean that I don't like you or feel anything bad toward you. I guess that I grew up thinking that the world worked a certain way. Even though I've expanded some of my definitions since I found out about witches, there are still some things that I automatically believe or assume and it freaks me out a little when they turn out not to be like I thought they were." Paul fought to explain.

"So what bothers you about me being a sprite?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Nothing. I mean, I'm not bothered at all by that part of it." Paul said hurriedly.

"Then what part *does* bother you?" Lex asked curiously.

"That you didn't exist last week. I think that part bothers me the most." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Do you remember when you first met G?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Mom and I walked through the house for what seemed like forever, and when we finally got to the room where G was, he gave us a message from Dad." Paul said slowly as he fought to remember.

"It was the green parlor. G was decoding an ancient grimoire in hopes that the old style of magic would inspire him in his sorcery." Lex said very carefully.

"Are you remembering G's memories or did you exist to some degree as part of him?" Paul asked carefully.

"That's a hard question. I don't recall having a separate sense of 'self' when I think back to those times, but I don't feel like I'm remembering someone else's memories either. I was me and I'm still me... I don't know how else to describe it." Lex finished helplessly.

"When you were brought into being in the vinculum and filled to overflowing with magic from the Mikael Spear, you became your own person. We kind of branched off at that point and your life became your own." G carefully explained.

"No. At least, that's not all there is to it." D interjected.

"What are we missing?" G asked curiously.

"You could pour unlimited magic into an illusion for as long as you wanted and it wouldn't *ever* create a sprite. In fact, if it were that easy, the world would probably be overrun with them." D said frankly.

"Can you just tell us? After the week that we've had, we still have to get home and be ready for school in the morning." Paul asked irritably.

"So you're not going to fight me about going to school?" D asked hopefully.

"No. I understand what you were saying and I agree that this is an opportunity for us to shine... or to stink up the place." Paul finished with a grin.

"If putting high magic into an illusion doesn't make a sprite, what does?" G asked his father firmly.

"A gift from the gods?" D suggested, only half seriously.

The glare that he received from G told him that the flippant answer was *not* appreciated. However, the grin from Paul assured him that it at least was funny.

"Was it me? Did I somehow actually create a living being?" G asked hesitantly.

"Yes. And take it from someone who's created two, I completely understand why it freaks you out a little." D said simply.

"Two?" G asked in confusion.

"You and your sister. Your creation is no less a miracle than Lex's." D said firmly.

Paul glanced over in time to see the smile that put on Lex's face.

"Okay. If I created Lex, how did I do it?" G asked anxiously.

"You would know better than I would. Although I recall Paul having a theory about it that seemed quite plausible in the heat of the moment." D said thoughtfully.

"What was that?" G asked desperately.

"When Lex became animated, Paul seemed to assume that it was because the flow of magic had awakened a magical ability within you which was something like mine and your grandfather's. He and I both have a gift for animation, and your grandfather can even bestow some basic instincts in the figures that he controls. It makes perfect sense that you could have inherited a variation of that." D explained.

"Maybe. But since I don't know how I did it, I don't know if I could do it again." G said thoughtfully.

"That's probably something that you won't have to worry too much about." D said reluctantly.

"Why not?" G asked cautiously at his father's change in mood.

"Dr. Williams is going to have a look at you when we get back and make a determination about your newfound ability." D said very diplomatically.

"Wait. What's that all about?" Paul asked with concern.

"It's simply a precaution. Dr. Williams will investigate the extent of G's magical ability and his control. Considering that G probably needs access to the Mikael Spear to use that ability again, I doubt that Dr. Williams will do much more than tell you that you need to be sure to be careful if you tap into an enduring source of air magic again."

"But what happens if G has the ability to create someone else like Lex, I mean, right here and now, or whenever he wants?" Paul asked curiously.

"If something like that were to happen, then steps would be taken to mitigate the situation as quickly and simply as possible." D said carefully.

"Which means?" Paul prompted.

"Which means that they would do the same thing to G that they would do to you if you started summoning demons willy-nilly and releasing them into the world unsupervised. Certain things cannot be allowed and we have to accept that reasonable precautions have to be taken." D said gravely.

"So they might curse me to keep me from using that ability or they might counsel me to keep me from wanting to." G quietly explained to his brother.

"Are you in trouble for creating me?" Lex asked cautiously.

"No. I'm glad you were created. You helped us out when we needed it." G quickly reassured him.

"Lex, no one has suggested that you shouldn't have been created or that you should be destroyed. Things like this sometimes happen. If I recall correctly, some air and water elementals have been known to have been created by gods to protect special

magical places from mundane people. I also happen to know that elementals can be born to magical parents." D carefully explained.

"Yeah. Dex is an earth elemental and just his mom is a witch. His dad is a mundane human." Paul interjected.

"That's right. And sometimes there's no 'reason' that anyone can discern. Some things just 'are'." D finished somewhat distantly.

"How much longer before we get home?" G asked tiredly.

"Just about five minutes." D said with a smile, then thought to add, "I called your mom from the airport and told her that we were on our way, so she's sure to have a big meal waiting for us when we arrive."

"What should I do while you're eating? Would it be better for me to go somewhere else?" Lex asked anxiously.

"You should go with us, and maybe even try some food if anything looks good to you." D said with a comforting smile at the nervous boy.

"But I don't eat..." Lex said hesitantly.

"You don't *have to* eat. But you can if you want to. Your body is sustained by magic, so you'll never have to worry about starving." D easily explained.

"I didn't know that." Lex said slowly.

"Neither did I." G quietly added.

"Do you think it's the same for Dex? I mean, he's had dinner with us. Do you think he just eats because he doesn't want to feel different from everyone else?" Paul asked thoughtfully.

"It's hard to say. Up until the time when he fully joined with the earth, he might have needed the food to some degree. Now that he has completely embraced being an oriad, I doubt that he *needs* to eat food at all, but he probably does it anyway, simply out of habit." D said speculatively.

"Did you tell Beth about me?" Lex asked cautiously.

"No. I feel that this is one of those things that's better explained face-to-face."

* * * * *

"I don't have any suitcases or anything. I don't know what I'm supposed to do." Lex said as they walked through the outside entry into G's room.

"Well, since we're pretty much identical, I'm kinda hoping that you would help me take care of my stuff, since you'll be using it until you get stuff of your own." G said as he led the way through the living room area to his bedroom.

"We're practically the same size, so you can borrow things from me too. Remember, I know how it is. I was the one borrowing things for a while." Paul said warmly to his newest brother.

"I just feel like I'm intruding..." Lex began to say but was interrupted.

"You're not." Paul said firmly, then added more gently, "But I know that there's nothing we can say that will convince you of it. Take it from one who's recently been there, swallow your pride and allow the people around you to help you. If you'll do that, pretty soon you'll get to a point where you can pay people back and validate the trust they had in you."

Lex blinked with surprise, then stammered, "Thank you. I'll try to keep that in mind."

"*Boys, your father told me how hungry you are, so dinner will be waiting for you in the dining room whenever you're ready. You can start without us, your father and I will join you in a few minutes.*" Beth's voice said over the intercom.

"I need to drop my stuff in my room. Don't leave without me." Paul rushed to say.

"We'll go with you." G said reasonably.

* * * * *

Paul set his backpack and luggage just inside his bedroom door, then hurried to join G and Lex in the glass hallway leading back to the main house.

"Do you think Dad told her about Lex yet?" Paul asked as they walked as a group at a deliberate pace.

"Knowing Dad, he'll probably tell her just enough to keep her from being too surprised and everything he says will be technically true but he'll probably hold back from telling her the *whole* truth until we're all together." G said speculatively.

"So what do you think is the best thing for us to do?" Paul asked cautiously, then glanced at Lex with concern.

"Let Dad handle it. Follow his lead. I bet he's got this planned through the third Tuesday of next month. Anything we try to do to help him will probably just mess things up for him." G finished confidently.

"I can't help but think that my being here is an intrusion. I mean, if they wanted another kid, they've got the room and the money to arrange that." Lex said quietly.

"Sometimes you don't realize what was missing in your life until you have it unexpectedly given to you." Paul said seriously.

"Does that mean that you're happy here?" G asked with a smile.

"Stop fishing for compliments." Paul said with a grin, then took firm hold of G's arm and drew him into a kiss.

Lex stopped and stared with surprise at the abrupt, yet heartfelt action.

As the kiss ended, Paul whispered against G's lips, "*That's* how happy I am to be here."

"Good to know." G said breathlessly.

"Should I leave you two alone?" Lex asked cautiously.

"No. Besides, the dining room's right up here, on the left." Paul said with an easy grin at him.

"Okay. Thanks. But actually, I think the dining room is down this hallway and to the right." Lex said frankly.

Without a word, G walked between the two and placed a hand on the back of each of their necks.

Gently, yet firmly, he guided both his brothers to turn to the right and step through the doorway.

* * * * *

"Oh, *this* dining room." Paul said with feigned surprise, almost sounding sincere.

Catching on, Lex quickly said, "Yeah. Everyone knows where *this* dining room is."

"Hi." A small voice cautiously said from the other side of the room.

"Lucky?! What are you doing here?" G asked with surprise.

"My mom said that I'm going to be living here now." Lucky timidly answered.

"Wow. Okay. I bet there's got to be some kind of story behind that." G said thoughtfully.

"Are you waiting in here for dinner?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. Aunt Beth sent me in here to wait with you while she talks to Uncle D about me being here." Lucky said in a small voice.

"Well, it's probably not going to be as bad as you're thinking." G quietly assured the boy.

"Yeah. I guess Mom had a surprise for D and D had a surprise for Mom, so it kind of works."

"It has symmetry." G said with a nod.

"I'm D's surprise. My name is Lex."

"I know. I remember you from when I visited before."

"Well, I remember you too, because G remembers you."

"Did G make you real?"

"Yeah. We think so, even though none of us are really sure how it happened."

"I just wanted to know so that maybe I could make Zah Zah real too."

"Have you been working on Zah Zah since you left?" G asked with a smile of anticipation.

"Yeah. I worked on some other things too. But Zah Zah's the only one that really does anything. Even though there's more I want to do, I don't think I know all the stuff I need to know to make it work right." Lucky carefully explained.

"Do you think we should start eating or wait for the rents?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I'd rather wait. Even though Mom said to start without them, I'd feel funny about it." G said frankly.

"Well then, maybe Lucky can show us what he's been working on." Paul said to G, then turned his attention to Lucky and continued, "If you wouldn't feel too weird about it."

"Nothing I've done is as good as Lex. The best thing I've done is Zah Zah. I've been working on other stuff too... but I always seem to get stuck before I can finish it." Lucky said timidly.

"We probably don't have much time before the parents get here. Just whip something up so we can see what you've been up to. None of us will probably get much of a chance to show off until after dinner." Paul said encouragingly.

"Can you bring Ginh Zah so she can see what I've been doing?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"How about we wait until after dinner for that? Ginh Zah can't eat our food so it'd be kinda rude to just bring her here for a couple minutes or to make her sit and watch while we eat in front of her." Paul carefully explained.

"That's okay. I'll show her later." Lucky confirmed before starting to cast his spell.

"Nice form there, buddy." Paul said as he recognized the vast increase in Lucky's precision of hand movements.

"Yeah. Good job on the chant, too. Nice and tight." G quietly added, careful not to miss a moment of the spellcasting.

"That's not an illusion, is it?" Lex asked curiously.

"In some sense of the word, I suppose it is. But the weird way Paul and Lucky have combined different magical disciplines, they've made it solid and given it weight." G said absently, whilst keeping the majority of his attention on the spellcasting.

"But you did that with me too, didn't you?" Lex asked curiously.

G was surprised enough by the question that he turned his attention away from Lucky.

"I created an illusion. I rigged it with the mechanics so that I could pose it, and potentially one day animate it. How that empty thing became you is still not entirely

clear to me. But what Lucky is doing is something completely different from what I did." G said firmly.

"There! How does she look?" Lucky asked happily.

The disturbing sight of the scribbled and jagged cat-like creature was worse than Paul remembered.

"Oh my God! What did you do to her eyes?" G asked as he took a literal step back.

Paul turned his attention to Zah Zah's face and froze in horror at the freakish sight.

"I thought that I could do better than the little red dots that I was using for eyes. I worked really hard to make her eyes look as real as possible." Lucky carefully explained.

"I think that's the problem." Paul muttered.

"What do you mean?" Lucky asked cautiously.

Paul immediately noticed the younger boy's anxiety.

Deliberately adjusting his voice to sound a bit more relaxed, Paul gently said, "The way her eyes were before, they were a little creepy, but that was mostly in a spooky movie way. Having her eyes looks so real is *really* disturbing."

"Do you think that I should change it?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"I think that you should reevaluate how you feel about her eyes. If you think she looks better this way than with the red dots, then you should keep them like this." Paul said decisively.

G slowly nodded his agreement, then added, "If you're making something for someone else, then you need to worry about *their* vision of how it should look. But Zah Zah is your creation. You need to make her look *exactly* how you see her in your own mind."

"At the same time..." Lex interjected, "...you might also want to consider how you want people to react to your creation. Do you want them to be afraid of her? Do you want them to feel sorry for her? Or do you just want them to take one look at her and be so creeped out that they'll refuse to look at her ever again?"

"I think he's saying that you should consider how Zah Zah feels." G said uncertainly.

"Zah Zah doesn't feel anything." Lucky said simply.

"I didn't used to either." Lex succinctly countered.

Paul thoughtfully nodded, then slowly added, "It doesn't matter how or if Zah Zah feels anything. Right now I think it's more important to look at not only what you're doing and why you're doing it, but also take into account how it looks to others."

"I didn't think you worried about things like that." G said honestly.

"I'm usually not. But what I'm talking about is more general. The people around you judge what kind of person you are by your observable actions. I think it would be irresponsible of us to tell Lucky not to worry about what other people think. If he listens to us, people might think that he's creepy or weird." Paul said frankly.

"So, you think Lucky should try to make Zah Zah look more 'normal'?" G asked cautiously.

"No. I'm saying that Lucky needs to take into account that if he makes Zah Zah look really freaky and disturbing, that people might think that he's too weird to be trusted around non-witches or that he might even need 'professional' help." Paul said seriously.

After a long silent moment Lucky hesitantly asked, "Should I change Zah Zah or not?"

"All we're asking you to do is decide what you really want. If you really like her eyes that way, then you should keep them that way. But if you do, you'll need to realize that there will be people who will think she's too creepy to have around."

"Her eyes really *do* look human. I don't think I could make such real looking eyes on anything other than a human form." G quietly admitted.

"It's not just that they look real, it's how they react. They blink and shift toward the sound when one of us talks. It's almost like she understands what we're talking about." G said quietly as he carefully studied Zah Zah's eyes.

"You modified the animation that Dad taught you, didn't you?" Paul asked carefully.

"Yeah. Except that I had to tie it together so the eyes wouldn't move in different directions at the same time. After that, I made them look like they were focusing in on whatever Zah Zah was listening to." Lucky explained.

"Still, there's something about the expression in her eyes that makes it seem like she's listening and understanding everything that we say. It's really very chilling." G said gravely.

Lucky made a quick hand gesture and Zah Zah immediately reacted by standing on her hind legs and letting loose a low guttural growl.

G and Lex scrambled back as Paul watched with interest. After a moment to consider, he finally asked, "So you can operate her like a puppet?"

"Yeah." Lucky said, then made another gesture in Zah Zah's direction.

Resting on her haunches, Zah Zah appeared to focus her attention on Paul, then she made a quick swipe in Paul's direction with her jagged claws bared.

"Is she as dangerous as she looks?" G cautiously asked.

"Not really." Lucky admitted, then explained, "I think she could probably hurt someone if she scratched them, but casting the spell to make her move takes so long that anyone could see what I was doing before I did it."

"Yeah. Animation is like that." G easily agreed.

"Maybe you could help him." Paul suggested.

"Actually, Dad's the best one for that. Everything I know about animation, I learned in school. And I've never been able to make most of it work." G said honestly.

"Do you think that I'll be able to learn about illusions and animation?" Lex asked curiously.

G and Paul looked at each other with question for a moment, then Paul slowly said, "In some sense of things, you *are* an animated illusion."

"Yeah. But more than that, I've also got G's knowledge of Sorcery. If they don't want me learning animation and illusion magic, then I'm going to have to go back and start at the beginning." Lex said frankly.

"I kind of just thought that you'd be in classes like Dex, except that Dex doesn't have any magical ability of his own, just access to a pure element." Paul said thoughtfully.

"I not only have access to the pure element of air, but I also have the training and abilities in Sorcery." Lex said seriously.

"Can you make a copy of yourself?" G asked curiously.

"You mean, like a self-portrait?" Lex asked to confirm.

"Yeah. If you have the same abilities that I do, can you do the most difficult school assignment that I've ever done?" G explained.

"I don't know... I can try." Lex said before starting to form hand signs.

"Can you create another copy of Lex?" Paul cautiously asked G.

"I should be able to. Let's see what happens." G immediately answered.

"While they're doing that, why don't you show me your Zah Zah spell again. I'd like to see if I'll be able to cast it." Paul said warmly to Lucky.

"I take a lot of shortcuts." Lucky warned him.

"That's okay. I can see through most spells. Just go through your spell for me and I'll let you know if I need for you to explain something." Paul assured him.

"Okay." Lucky said with a smile, obviously not only happy to be receiving attention, but also with being taken seriously.

* * * * *

"Sorry to keep you waiting..." D was saying as he hurried into the dining room.

Beth was right behind him, pushing K in her stroller. She stopped at D's side and froze in place, just as D had done.

Silence reigned as eight pairs of eyes looked back at them from the other side of the room.

"Please tell me that we're not adopting all of you." D finally said.

"Just a few of us." Paul said from the group.

"What's going on in here?" Beth asked as she pushed the stroller past her husband to her customary place at the table.

"Lex and G kinda challenged each other to make copies of themselves while Lucky and I were making Zah Zahs." Paul answered.

"Well, anyone who's interested in having dinner had better take a seat." Beth said simply.

Two of the Gs and both Zah Zahs immediately disappeared in little puffs and poofs.

D smiled with appreciation at his wife's ability to handle such an unexpected situation.

Chapter 2

"What's Lucky doing here?" G asked as he helped himself to the nearest serving dish.

"Kyla has been fighting with her local school system, trying to get Lucky a decent education. It turns out that they're more interested in forcing all the children into a standardized track than helping any one of them to discover any special talents that they might have." Beth said darkly.

"That sounds like the exact opposite of what a school should be." D interjected.

"True. But according to Kyla, it has all the makings of a perfectly functional and efficient warehouse." Beth added.

"If it's that bad, then why isn't Star here too?" Paul asked curiously, then glanced at Lucky to find him listening intently.

"To be honest, Star doesn't need any specialized attention. She appears to be perfectly 'middle of the road' in both her temperament and ability. Uprooting her from everything that's familiar to her would only cause her harm." Beth calmly explained.

"But it wouldn't hurt Lucky in the same way?" Lex cautiously ventured.

Beth looked at him strangely, then at G for an uncertain moment before responding, "No. Thanks to G and Paul helping Lucky discover his hidden talents he no longer fits into the one size fits all box that the school system constructed for him and his classmates. That not only leads to a lot of frustration for him personally, but it also sets him apart from his peers, making him a prime target for ridicule and harassment."

"Don't worry, buddy. I've got a lifetime of experience dealing with that kind of stuff. Stick with me and you'll be able to stand up to *anything* before you know it." Paul assured his adoptive cousin.

"I hope you mean that, because once Lucky has completed his evaluation, he may end up being even *more* isolated than he was at his old school." Beth said reluctantly.

"Why's that, Mom?" Paul asked curiously.

Beth looked around the table, apparently deciding if her audience were of sufficient age and maturity to comprehend the decision that she had unilaterally made.

Before the silence could go on too long, Beth finally responded, "If we were to try and put Lucky into an elementary school setting, he would probably be worse off than he was at his own school. While I believe that the school administration would do their best to accommodate his needs, the ability that Lucky has demonstrated is more advanced than they are capable of dealing with. It would essentially isolate him, the same as getting him a private tutor would be likely to do."

"So it would end up being the same as him going to his old school, except without him having the people that he already knows around him." Paul said speculatively.

"It would probably still be *better* because the school administration here is at least willing to *try* to help him develop his gifts." Beth said seriously, then paused for a moment before continuing, "But I think we can do better."

"Are you going to send Lucky to *our* school?" G ventured a guess.

"That remains to be seen. I've already spoken with Mrs. Bright at the school and she's arranged for an evaluation tomorrow morning. Once we have those results, we're going to sit down and do what we can to make the best long term decision for Lucky." Beth said frankly.

"If that ends up happening, it might be a good idea to fix it so Lucky can spend some time with Filipe. Even though they're not the same age, Filipe knows what it feels like to be the youngest person in a group and he's been able to handle it pretty well." Paul suggested.

"Yes. Maybe this weekend if he's available. It's always a pleasure to have him over." Beth finished with a smile.

"Keep in mind that he's been away on the work-study. He may need some time to recuperate or his host family might have felt his absence and want to spend some time catching up with him." D said firmly.

"We'll invite him. However it turns out will be fine." Beth said simply.

"I've spoken with Dr. Williams about doing an evaluation on G tomorrow, so G and Lucky may be able to go together." D said informatively.

"I'm probably going to need an evaluation too." Lex hesitantly added.

"Yes. I'm sure that Dr. Williams is already planning on that." D assured him.

"Please excuse me for asking, but... what *exactly* are you?" Beth asked Lex hesitantly.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought Dad... I mean, D already told you."

"You had it right the first time." D quietly assured him.

Lex flashed a quick smile in D's direction, then said to Beth, "When we were spellcasting, G needed to be in two places at once and somehow he was able to make his 'self-portrait' into a living person... me."

"D said your name is Lex." Beth cautiously said in a leading tone.

"Yes. Lexington Tamhas Darroch." Lex confirmed.

"And you're a..." Beth prompted.

"An air elemental. A sprite." Lex helpfully provided.

"Oh? So you're not a witch." Beth said to verify her understanding.

"No. But as far as I can tell, I can probably do anything that a witch can do." Lex reluctantly informed her.

"Except eat." Paul said as he glanced meaningfully at Lex's empty plate.

Lex smiled at Paul, then reached over to Paul's plate and picked up a single brussels sprout.

"If you're trying food for the first time, that's probably not the thing you want to start with. A lot of people don't like brussels sprouts." Paul warned him.

"I've been part of G for all of his life up until this week. I remember what brussels sprouts taste like. I just don't know how my body will react to food." Lex said honestly.

"Well, if it turns out that you can't eat, it won't be a big deal. I can think of worse things." G said honestly.

Lex slowly chewed the Brussel's sprout and his eyes seemed to light up as he continued.

"I'm guessing he likes it." Paul said with a smile.

"That tastes *so* much better than I remember it." Lex said happily as he stood and served himself a large portion of Brussel's sprouts from the center of the table.

As Lex was sitting back, D reluctantly said, "Why don't you go ahead and have some of everything."

Lex looked around at everyone watching him and realized what he had done.

"Oh, right." Lex said as he stood again.

G, Paul and Lucky all helped by passing things to him until he had a little of everything.

"Have you thought about the questions that will be asked when G's identical twin brother shows up to school out of the blue?" Beth asked curiously.

D, Paul and G shared a look before D answered for all of them. "No. I don't think we've considered that."

"Curtis and his family have been here and they never saw or heard about me having a twin brother." G said thoughtfully.

"And there's all the people at school who know you. Even if you don't talk to all of them every day, they know who you are and who your family is." Paul quietly added.

"That's right. Because of school, there are a lot of mundane people that I know at a distance." G confirmed.

"If you think about the level of secrecy surrounding the work-study, it would probably be best not to have to answer a lot of questions about Lex's origin even to your casual friends who are witches." D said seriously.

"So, should Lex not go to our school?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. That's not what I'm saying." Beth hurried to interject.

"Then what *are* you saying?" Paul asked his mother slowly.

"That it might be best if some of those amongst us who have talents for sorcery might come up with some sort of disguise for Lex that would make it easier for him to blend in at a new school." Beth said frankly.

After a long silent moment, Lex quietly said, "Actually, that sounds like a pretty good idea."

"Is anyone here good with charm magic?" Paul asked as he looked around.

"I can usually do it if I have to. Why?" G asked cautiously.

"For Lex. If he has the spell put on an amulet, he can take it off if he needs to and doesn't have to worry about it being exactly the same every time." Paul said frankly.

"If Lex is able to use sorcery on the same level that I can, an amulet will only get in his way. Imagine trying to play your clarinet while you've got some other type of music playing in your headphones." G fought to explain.

"Yeah. And besides that, any sorcerer worth their salt is going to want to tweak and improve their glamor with each casting. Anyone who would be content to use an amulet has no sense of artistry... no soul." Lex added.

"Oh. I just thought..." Paul trailed off with a dismissive shake of his head and a shrug.

"I know what you thought, and thank you for thinking of it. If I can't get my sorcery up and running for some reason, then an amulet is the next best thing for us to try." Lex assured him.

"Are you going to have everything that you'll need to take care of this tonight?" D asked urgently, then explained, "If we need to go out and get you anything, let us know as soon as possible."

"I think G's got everything that I'll need." Lex said with a questioning glance in G's direction.

"Yeah. Even though I haven't tried to do anything like this before, I should have everything we'll need in my sorcery toolbox." G confirmed.

"You have a sorcery toolbox?" Paul chuckled.

"Yeah. And if you don't have a wizardry toolbox yet, you probably will soon. There are some common things that you need for just about every spell. You get into the

habit of keeping those things together, so they're easy to get to when you need them." G seriously explained.

"He's right. I've still got mine." Beth confirmed.

"I guess I do too. I've just never thought of it being a 'toolbox' before." Paul admitted.

"Before I forget, are you boys going to have a problem with Lucky staying out in your rooms with you? I didn't think it would be right to put him in a guest room all on his own." Beth asked with concern.

"Yeah. That's no problem. We'll probably end up crashing in my living room, no matter what we *plan* on doing." G finished with a chuckle.

Lex and Paul nodded their wholehearted agreement.

"Paul. Before you turn in for the night, it might be a good idea if you and your mother spent a little time discussing... recent events." D said urgently.

"Huh?" Paul asked, not at all getting the message that D was trying to convey.

"You need to talk to your mom about meeting your dad." G translated.

The shocked look on Paul's face paled in comparison to the look on Beth's.

"Oh, um. Yeah. Right." Paul stammered, then collected himself before continuing, "There's really not much to say about that. I met V... that's what we're calling him... and he helped us out a little with the project that we were doing."

"Did he know who you were?" Beth asked cautiously.

"Yeah. He was on top of the whole thing. He asked how you were doing and when he found out that you got married, he said that he was happy for you." Paul said carefully.

"I had always harbored the hope that he didn't mean for things to turn out the way that they did." Beth quietly admitted.

"Yeah. He said that he was sorry about all that, but not sorry that I was born. He seemed to be really happy and proud and stuff." Paul said as he fought to sound casual about it.

"I just wanted to be sure that you were aware of their meeting in case something more came of it later." D told Beth gently.

"Thank you for telling me. I could easily see myself being blindsided by the information, if it had been revealed at an inopportune time."

"Yeah. There's one other thing that happened that you should probably know about." Paul said as he made a gesture to an open area beside his plate on the table.

A small formation of five flames sprang into being, hovering a few inches above the table.

Everyone watched to see what impressive magic Paul was about to perform.

With a simple gesture, the flames transformed into plumes of water, gurgling up like five miniature fountains.

"A lot of people got to investigate their primary and secondary elemental affinities during our 'work-study'. There were a lot of surprises, but mine... somehow I've got both 'fire' and 'water' abilities. According to everything that I've ever heard, that's not supposed to be possible." Paul said frankly.

"What do you want me to do about it?" Beth asked her son cautiously.

"I just thought that you might have some idea of why I can do fire and water at the same time." Paul said, then suiting actions to words, picked up the five little fountains to form a ball of water in one palm while a fireball of equal size formed in the other.

"As you recall, up until the wedding you couldn't do any magic at all. I really don't have any idea how or why you can do half the things you do. But so far as I can tell, these are all gifts that you have the opportunity to use or refuse, at your own discretion." Beth said honestly.

"You're a witch/demon with hot and cold running magic. I can think of worse things to be." Lex said honestly.

Paul brought his hands together, causing the fire and water to dissipate in a brief hissing steam cloud, then calmly said, "I guess you're right."

"Who wants snickerdoodles and vanilla ice cream?" Beth asked as she got up from the table.

"Oh my God, yes!" Lex exclaimed.

Paul, Lucky and G looked at him curiously.

"This whole eating thing... I wish that I had tried it earlier. I don't remember it being nearly as good when I was G. Everything tastes so... extreme!" Lex said happily.

The sound of a fussy baby rose up from the stroller, drawing all attention.

"D? Would you mind taking care of the dessert? I believe the princess is ready for *her* dinner." Beth said warmly.

"I've got it." D said easily as he walked to the sideboard, where Beth had already started dishing up desserts.

"Do you need any help?" Lex cautiously asked.

"You could clear the dinner plates while I'm doing this." D suggested.

With little more than a glance at each other, all four boys began to work, clearing away the detritus of their shared meal.

* * * * *

Once everyone, including Beth, were back at their places around the table, Beth finally said, "I know you can't go into the details of what happened during your 'work-study', but would it be possible for you to let me in on one or two pivotal points so that I won't feel completely left out?"

The boys simultaneously looked at D, obviously expecting him to answer for them.

"As you said, we can't go into the details. But I think that if we disclose a few of the outcomes, you'll get a sense of the scale of the project that was undertaken." D said carefully.

Beth nodded that she understood.

"As you've already been told, we fell a bit short on spell-casting, so in a moment of peak magic, G called up his self-portrait and somehow imbued it with consciousness." D said carefully.

"But how... I mean... how?" Beth stammered.

"We're still working on that. Maybe Dr. Williams will be able to come up with something after his examination tomorrow. In the meantime we're going with Paul's theory that this is a variation of mine and my father's animation abilities that was unlocked when G directly accessed the magic of pure elemental air." D explained.

"Pure air? As in, holding a relic of elemental magic?" Beth asked cautiously.

"Yes. That's exactly what I mean." D confirmed.

"Paul was holding a relic of elemental magic too. He was holding elemental water." G interjected.

"Yeah. That was before Dad got called in. By the time Dad got there, they had already decided that I needed to let someone else hold the water and that I needed to stand as a Magi." Paul finished quietly.

"Wait. Magi? As in, an Assembly of the Magi?" Beth asked cautiously.

"Yeah. The whole 'work-study' thing ended up being a lot bigger than anyone expected. The only way to deal with the whole thing at once was to access... let's just say it was A LOT of magic." Paul finished uncomfortably.

"During the assembly, Paul played the part of Balthasar, the Magi of Composition." D said proudly.

"No. That's too big for you. You're too new at magic. There's no way you're at a point, either in knowledge or in power, to wield that level of magic." Beth said firmly.

"Mom. I already did it." Paul said frankly, then added, "Each of the Magi were strong in some ways, but deeply broken and flawed in others. I gave them my strength and they made up for my weakness. I'm stronger than I was before because they showed me what I was missing."

Beth looked at her son dubiously, but didn't contradict him.

"So Paul was a Magi and G was holding a relic of elemental air. In the midst of all that, G's illusionary self-portrait was somehow endowed with consciousness, which makes the resulting being an air elemental, more commonly known as a sprite." D carefully explained.

"But didn't you say that Lex also has the same abilities as a witch?" Beth asked curiously, then checked to see that K was content with her bottle.

"From what we've seen so far, Lex is competent in sorcery and has a working knowledge of basic magic. Add to that, he has direct access to elemental air, which most witches have to struggle to tap into. Once the evaluation is complete, we'll have a better idea of what he can focus on to develop his abilities to achieve his best potential." D said thoughtfully.

Beth glanced in Lex's direction and couldn't help but smile at the expression of bliss that Lex wore while enjoying his cookies and ice cream.

"G. Do you have any ideas for how to alter Lex's appearance?" D asked curiously.

"No. He knows everything that I know, so I just thought that I'd leave it to him to do." G said honestly.

"Tell me, were you surprised at how difficult it was to make a self-portrait?" D asked his son curiously.

"Yeah! In fact, everyone in my class was just as surprised as I was. None of us ever thought that it could be that difficult."

"If that's the case, what are the chances that *altering* your appearance might end up being at least as difficult as *duplicating* it?" D asked in a leading tone.

"So you're saying that it's probably going to be a lot harder for Lex to change himself than it would be for me to change him?" G asked cautiously.

"Think about it. You created Lex. You are intimately familiar with every fiber of his being. Wouldn't it be easier for you to make a change to what you can see that's right in front of you than it would be for you to make a change to yourself?" D asked seriously.

"But wouldn't it be better for me to be responsible for myself?" Lex quietly asked.

"Yes. But if you look at it practically, we need this for tomorrow morning and you just might not be able to do it all on your own. If you and G can come up with an illusion of some sort, that's great. But if you need for him to cast it on you, then you can do that. Later, when you have the time, you can develop a version of the spell that you can do all on your own and tweak to your liking."

Lex thought about that for a moment, then slowly said, "Okay. You're probably right. When I thought about changing my appearance, I was thinking more in terms of how I would cast a spell on something in front of me that I could see and touch

with my own hands. After all the trouble G had crafting and rigging *me*, it's likely that I will have trouble trying to overlay or warp my own perceivable surface."

"Can you be smaller?" Lucky asked curiously.

"What's that?" Lex asked the younger boy with an indulgent smile.

"Right now you look just like G. If you wanted, could you be closer to my size?" Lucky asked cautiously.

Lex looked at G inquisitively and received an almost imperceptible nod before responding, "Yeah. Actually, there's no reason that I couldn't change myself like that."

"Then maybe... I mean, if you wanted... you and me could kind of... you know, go to school together, so neither one of us would have to go there all alone." Lucky finished in a voice so low that it could barely be heard.

Lex looked back to G and asked, "What do you say? Do you think that I can be changed enough so that I can take on the role of 'Cousin Lex' and go to school alongside Lucky?"

"Maybe. We could try." G said uncertainly.

Before Lex could respond, D added, "It's probably going to have a lot to do with what type of magic Lucky has. If his talent is based in air, then it probably wouldn't be too difficult to arrange for the two of you to have the majority of your classes together. If his ability is in another discipline... I don't know what to tell you."

"If it turns out to be fire or water, you could probably work it out so that I could work with him." Paul added.

"I'd say that's less likely. Not only are your abilities far less common, but you've also achieved such an advanced level that I doubt that it would be to Lucky's benefit to be partnered with you." D said honestly.

"Yeah. It's just that kind of thinking that's kept Lucky at the warehouse school. When Lucky got to spend a little time with people who were more advanced than he was, he began to dream about using his abilities in new and different ways." Paul said defiantly.

D thought about that for a moment before responding, "Point taken."

Paul was a little surprised by the easy concession, but was also gratified that his father took him seriously enough to consider his words.

"What kind of magic should I do?" Lucky asked into the silence that followed.

"What we need to find out is what kind of magic you *can* do. Then, once we know that, we can work on getting you teachers and classmates who can help you learn how to put your magic to good use." Beth said gently.

"You're not listening." Lucky said as tears of frustration welled in his eyes.

"Then tell us again." Paul said gently, then prompted, "Go ahead."

"I want you to tell me what kind of magic I *should* do." Lucky said desperately.

"It doesn't work that way. We have to know what kind of magic you *can* do..." D started to explain, but trailed off at Paul's warning look.

"Lucky. Tell me. What would you do if I told you that you *should* do fire?" Paul asked carefully.

"I'd show you what fire I can already do." Lucky answered simply.

"Can you do this?" Paul asked as he repeated his trick from earlier and made five little fireballs that looked like the flames on invisible candles.

"Uh huh." Lucky said as he repeated Paul's gesture exactly, ending with the same result.

"Oh... wow. You did that just right. How about this?" Paul asked as he made the short, yet complicated gesture to convert the fire to water.

"I never did that before." Lucky said as he fought to make the same gesture.

While his gesture was nowhere near 'graceful' Paul noticed that it was technically accurate and thus, provided the correct result.

"Wait. No. That can't be." Beth said slowly.

Undeterred, Paul moved the spoon from beside his plate to reside within the circle of little fountains of water.

Carefully watching Paul's every move, Lucky patted around until he found the fork beside his plate and moved it so that it was placed in the center of his own diagram.

"Before we start, we need to switch this back." Paul said as he made a clockwise gesture over the little gurgling fountains of water.

In a surprising transformation, the water seemed to ignite as it changed back into flames.

"Fire into air." Paul said as he brought up both hands to gesture.

As he did, the five little flames seemed to extinguish, but hanging in the space where each of the flames had been was a blur of wind, almost like five tiny tornadoes.

"Paul, you don't have an affinity for air. You *can't* do that." D said to him firmly.

"Whatever you say, Dad." Paul said with a grin as he continued undeterred.

"Fire into air." Lucky parroted, then performed his two handed symbols like a master mage.

Lucky's five little tornadoes appeared where the flames had been and held their place.

"Air into water." Paul said, then performed a gesture at high speed, so quickly that it was almost impossible to see.

"Air into water." Lucky repeated and flawlessly performed the gesture just as quickly as Paul had.

"Water into earth." Paul said as he performed a series of hand signs so complex that even the adults were having difficulty following along.

"Water into earth." Lucky said in deep concentration as he struggled to complete the entire series of complicated hand signs.

Paul stopped all motion and waited for Lucky to catch up to him.

When Lucky was finally finished, Paul quietly asked, "Do you want to do it with me?"

Still looking Paul in the eyes, Lucky gave a single nod.

At some signal none present could detect, Paul and Lucky began to start weaving the exact same hand signs at the exact same time. After about a dozen distinctly different signs, both said in unison, "The magics of fire, air and water I now channel

into the earth. Imbue this token of the earth with magic to cleanse, purify and heal. I entreat, this instrument of power that I create be forever nullified if used to cause harm. Thus I claim. Thus I swear. So let it be."

"What the *hell* did you just do?" Beth demanded to know.

"No. Not hell. Not this time. Nature." Paul told his mother as he took the piece of silver that had previously been a spoon. It had melted into a puddle on the table, then frozen in a nearly circular pool of metal.

"What did you just do?" D asked his son hesitantly.

"What I did is nothing compared to what Lucky just did." Paul said honestly.

"We'll get to that in a minute. Before we go any further, I just want to know what that is that you just made." D firmly demanded.

Paul handed the smooth round piece of silver to his father as he said, "It's just a simple healing charm. Actually, I was researching it for G. It's supposed to help with acne."

"What? But you used all four elements. You're not supposed to be able to do that." D said anxiously.

"Remember when I said that I wasn't supposed to be able to use fire and water at the same time? That's what I was trying to tell you. I have *two* primary magics. That means that I also have two *secondary* magics. As luck would have it, all my primaries and secondaries are basic elements, meaning that I can magically manipulate all four." Paul said honestly.

"No one is supposed to have that kind of power." Beth told her son firmly.

"C'mon Mom. There are people all over the place who have that kind of power all the time. It's what blessings, curses, charms and amulets are for. The only thing that's different about my power is that I was born with it." Paul said frankly.

"Why are you just telling us about this now?" D quietly asked.

"I just found out. I never even thought about trying to do anything important with water until I held the third grail."

"Okay. Let's just say for the sake of argument that you're interpreting events correctly. How unlikely is it that a one-in-a-million person who has two primary

elements would find himself in a position to find and recognize *another* one-in-a-million person?" D asked challengingly.

"Lucky doesn't have all four elements. I'm not sure if he has any." Paul said simply.

"*What* are you talking about?" Beth asked as she moved K to her shoulder and began gently patting her back.

"Lucky. What's your mom's magical ability?" Paul asked simply.

"She's a magic thief." Lucky slowly answered.

"But Lucky didn't steal your magic." D said slowly, obviously beginning to realize what Paul had already deduced.

"No. He doesn't steal magic, he mimics it." Paul said simply.

"But he was able to mimic all four elements being used at once." Beth said uncertainly.

"You guys probably know a lot more about this stuff than I do. I didn't grow up around it. I just noticed that every time I saw Lucky that he was able to copy spells that were a lot more advanced than he should be able to use. Once I figured that out, I went ahead and used the only spell that I could think of that would prove it."

"Lucky. What's the most complicated spell that you know?"

"Besides the one that Paul just did?"

"Yes. Besides that one."

"Zah Zah. Can I bring her here now?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"Yes. I think that would be fine. Go ahead. Whenever you're ready." D said encouragingly.

Lucky looked at the floor beside his chair, then made one simple gesture.

Out of nothing, a cat-like being bounded up from the floor and settled on Lucky's lap.

"What the hell..." D began to say as he stared in horror at the way-too-human eyes staring back at him over the edge of the table.

"Nah. You can't blame hell for this one." Paul said in hell's defense.

Chapter 3

"Zah Zah certainly has changed a lot since the last time you two visited." D said diplomatically, doing his best to play it cool.

"Yeah! I did the animation stuff just like you showed me, but then after I got home, I changed some of it so that Zah Zah could be more and more real."

"Well, whatever you did to her eyes certainly is... dramatic." D said very precisely.

"I just did like G and Paul showed me..." Lucky began to say but was interrupted.

"Naw. You don't need to give us any credit." Paul quickly declared.

"Yeah. This is all on you." G added emphatically.

"Why don't you tell us about the changes that you made? I'd be interested to know how someone without any illusory abilities could make something that looks so real and reacts so true to life." Lex said seriously.

"Okay. Yeah. And then maybe you can show me some of your sorcery tricks so that I can make Zah Zah even better." Lucky said excitedly.

"Boys? Why don't you do that when you get back to your rooms?" Beth asked before they could start comparing notes.

"Everyone just needs to keep in mind that ALL of us need to be up early for school in the morning. If you feel like starting any wild magical projects, you should probably try to hold them off until the weekend." Paul said firmly.

"Wait a minute. Who put you in charge?" G asked in a low voice as his clown features began to emerge.

"Do you really want to *bother* with this yourself?" Paul countered with a dismissive eyeroll for emphasis.

"Well, no." G reluctantly admitted as his clown features faded.

"Don't worry, you're still the alpha. I'm just taking care of the detail work for you." Paul gently explained.

"I feel like we shouldn't be listening to this. It sounds private." Lex told Lucky with a grin.

"Maybe we should get a room of our own so that they can talk to each other like that when they need to." Lucky said thoughtfully.

Lex looked at him with surprise for a moment, then finally responded, "Actually, that sounds like a pretty good idea."

"What's a good idea?" Paul asked curiously.

"Lucky and I were just discussing that after we fix me so that I look like I'm his age that maybe we could room together." Lex explained.

"You can use my room if you want. I'm always in G's room, so it's no problem for me." Paul easily offered.

"How about this?" D interrupted.

Once he was sure that he had everyone's attention, he continued, "Considering the layout of the rooms, it wouldn't take much to convert G's room into a suite for him and Paul and Paul's current room into a suite for Lex and Lucky."

"I didn't mean for you to do what I said. I was just asking a question." Lucky rushed to inform D.

Before D could explain, Lex quietly answered, "It's probably better this way. G and Paul are going to want to have private time together for kissing and stuff like that. It'll be best if we have a place of our own where we don't have to sit around pretending that we can't see them."

"Does anyone have a problem with this arrangement?" D asked as he looked around the table.

"Aren't you going to need some privacy too?" G asked his twin with concern.

"Yeah. Sooner or later I probably will. But it's going to be a while before Corabeth and I are at a point where we'll have to worry about that." Lex said frankly.

"Corabeth?" Beth asked cautiously.

"She's a girl from my wizardry class. I guess she's interested in Lex. At least, she *seems* to like him." Paul explained.

"You've got a girlfriend?" Lucky asked Lex with surprise.

"Yeah. Well, at least I hope so. I think that we're almost there. That's not a problem for you, is it?" Lex asked curiously.

"I just thought that since you were a copy of G that you'd be gay like G is." Lucky said frankly.

"Actually, I was kind of thinking the same thing." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"I like guys *and* girls." G reminded them.

"Oh, yeah. I guess that makes more sense." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"So what does that mean for the sleeping arrangements? Because I need to know what's going to make everyone comfortable before we start knocking down walls." D said frankly.

"By a suite of rooms, are you saying that we'd have separate bedrooms but combined sitting rooms? Something like that?" Paul asked slowly.

"Yes. You would each get a bedchamber and closet to yourself... maybe even a study area, we'll just have to wait and see what's practical." D said seriously.

"As long as we can still go to G's room and watch anime, I'm on board." Lex said simply.

"Yeah. Not only does G have good movies, but it's fun watching them with him and Paul." Lucky happily added.

"Good. Then if you four can put up with things being as they are for a day or two, I'll see to the arrangements." D said firmly.

"Thanks Dad." Paul said sincerely.

"Yeah. Thanks. On the way here, I didn't really understand what you were talking about when you said that you were making me part of your family. I mean, I did, but I didn't really. This is better than... anything." Lex said as he struggled with a sudden lump in his throat.

"I thought I was gonna be really unhappy to be away from my mom and my sister, but now I think I'm really gonna like it here." Lucky said honestly.

"That's good, because we're all happy that you're here." Beth told him reassuringly.

"And if you ever feel like you're missing your mom or your sister, you can call them and talk to them whenever you want." D reminded him.

"Yeah. Thank you again for the phone Uncle D. I text with Lenn a couple times a week. I still haven't told him that I'm here though. I need to do that." Lucky trailed off in thought as he absently petted Zah Zah on his lap.

"We can do a conference call with him when we get back to the room. We need to introduce him to Lex." G added.

D looked around the room to assess if everyone had finished their dessert before announcing, "There's no time like the present. You boys have a good evening and be sure to call if there's anything you need for us to do to help you prepare for tomorrow."

"This weekend, could you show me some more spells for Zah Zah? I think I've done all that I can with what you showed me so far." Lucky asked hopefully.

"That sounds like a GREAT idea. In fact, maybe all of us could sit down together as a family and brainstorm. With the odd collection of magic that we have here, I bet that we'll be able to come up with some really interesting ideas for you." D said cheerfully.

"Maybe down at the lake?" Paul asked hopefully.

"No. I think this time we should go to the *other* end of the track." D said with a smile.

"Where does that go?" Paul asked curiously.

"You'll find out on Saturday." D said with a mischievous grin.

"What? You're not going to tell me?" Paul asked disbelievingly.

D pointed at G and Lex in turn before firmly saying, "No telling. I want it to be a surprise."

"Yeah. Okay." G said, as Lex muttered, "I promise."

"Good night boys. Pleasant dreams." D said as he walked around the table.

He reached Lex first and when Lex stood up, D gave him a firm hug.

Lex returned the hug and was openly crying by the time he was released.

Lucky set Zah Zah on his chair and was in the same tearful state as Lex by the time his hug with D was finished.

Although G and Paul didn't start crying, their hugs were no less heartfelt.

As Lex made his way around the table, he was pulled into a hug by Beth.

"In case I forgot to tell you before, I'm glad you're here." Beth told him quietly before kissing him on the cheek.

As expected, his tears started flowing again and the whole hugging process continued on with Lucky, G, and eventually Paul.

* * * * *

By the time the boys filed out of the dining room, all of them were emotionally, as well as physically, exhausted.

"So, what all do we need to do before we can go to bed?" Lex finally asked.

"You and G need to work on getting you ready for school tomorrow." Paul said thoughtfully.

"We're going to need Lucky's help, at least for part of it. If I'm not going to be your size, then I'll need to be his, or I won't have anything to wear." Lex said honestly.

"You shouldn't have to worry about that. Thanks to Cain and Deimos, I've gotten pretty good with the basic clothes changing spell. We should be able to make it so that your clothes will resize when you do." Paul said frankly.

"What kind of spell is it? Because I'm pure air. I don't think I have a secondary." Lex cautioned.

"It's basic. You should be able to do it. At least, I haven't found anyone so far who can't." Paul said honestly.

"Can you show me?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"Do you have some kind of transformation that you can do?" Paul asked curiously.

"No." Lucky quietly admitted.

"Don't worry about it, buddy. Most of us get some kind of transformation automatically when we use our magic full-blast. I go all demony and G turns into a clown. As far as I know, Lex doesn't have a magical form." Paul finished thoughtfully.

"Maybe this *is* my magical form." Lex interjected.

Paul shrugged, silently admitting that he didn't know.

"Can you show me the spell?" Lucky asked Paul hopefully.

"Sure. That's what we'll do while G and Lex are working on changing Lex for school." Paul said as he draped an arm around Lucky's shoulders and gave him a quick hug.

"How do you do the changing thing though? I mean, is it a spell or what do you do to make it start?" Lucky asked curiously.

"What changing thing is that?" Paul asked curiously.

"I think he's asking about when you go full-out." G added from ahead of them.

"The easiest way to make that happen would probably be if you did a spell that would normally force you to go full-out and then watch and see what happens to Lucky when he mimics it." Lex casually suggested.

"Yeah. That sounds about right." Paul reluctantly admitted, then hurriedly added, "If we end up doing something like that, we're going to need both of you there to make sure that no one gets hurt."

"You won't have to worry about that. We wouldn't want to miss it anyway." G said with a grin back at them.

* * * * *

As soon as they were in G's sitting room, Paul and Lucky went directly to the beanbag chairs conveniently located in front of the big-screen television.

G and Lex continued on to G's bedroom, ostensibly to gather sorcery supplies from G's 'sorcery toolbox'.

"Will you show me the clothes changing spell?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"I can't believe that someone hasn't tried to teach you this stuff already! From what I've seen, the hardest part about teaching is getting people to *want* to learn." Paul said as he turned to face his adoptive cousin.

Lucky's determined look back at him prompted him into action.

"Okay. Just so you know, if you do this right now, nothing's going to happen. The only time you can see that it worked is if you transform in a way that would normally cause you to rip out your clothes or become too small to wear them." Paul said seriously.

"Okay. Just show me." Lucky said as he set Zah Zah aside.

Paul looked at the cat-like creature speculatively for a moment, then turned his attention back to Lucky.

"I'll show you the gestures first, then I'll tell you the words. If you're anything like me, you'll probably be able to do the words silently after one or two times of saying them. You might have to do the gestures for a few weeks, they're kind of complicated to do mentally."

Lucky nodded, then watched as Paul did the gestures.

"Now do it with me." Paul said, then went through the gestures slowly.

Paul was surprised that Lucky seemed to be having difficulty with the relatively simple gestures when he had done far more difficult gestures with relative ease earlier, in the dining room.

"Do you need for me to do it again?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Could you do it for real?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"How do you mean?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Don't do it like you're showing me how to. Do it for real. If you *really* cast the spell, then I can *really* see how it works." Lucky fought to explain.

"Oh! Okay. I get it." Paul said, then began to slowly and clearly enunciate each word of the spell as he simultaneously made the long version of each of the hand signs.

Before Paul was even halfway through, he noticed that Lucky was moving in time with him, saying each word and performing each hand sign in perfect synchronization with him.

When Paul was about two hand signs away from being finished, he stopped all movement and said, "Go ahead and finish it."

"I don't know how." Lucky automatically objected.

"It's just a simple seal." Paul gently prompted.

"I don't know what that is." Lucky said with frustration.

"So you can see the magic that I'm doing while I'm doing it and follow along, but you don't understand how it works?" Paul guessed.

"If you don't show me how to finish it, I'm going to lose it." Lucky said with desperation creeping into his voice.

"Yeah. Okay." Paul immediately responded, then followed by showing Lucky the final hand signs and saying the last few words of the spell.

As he did so, he made a conscious effort to 'see' the spell that Lucky was casting.

After a moment to make sense of what he was seeing, Paul quietly said, "You little sneak."

"What?" Lucky asked timidly, genuinely puzzled by the strange comment.

"I thought there was something going on, the way that you could join into my spellcasting without knowing the spell." Paul said with a smile.

"What did I do?" Lucky asked anxiously.

"I'm about to do something that I promised G that I wouldn't do, but if I'm right about what I think is going on, this will prove it." Paul said seriously.

"Huh?" Lucky asked as he reached to his side and petted Zah Zah.

"Just do what I'm doing and be sure to stop me if you have any trouble." Paul said seriously.

Lucky nodded, then scooted a little bit forward, to best mimic Paul's position.

Like before, Paul slowly and carefully enunciated the words of the spell as he went through the hand gestures.

Unlike the previous spelling, this one was more complex by an order of magnitude. While some of the manifestations were the same, the spell itself was drastically different.

Out of the corner of his eye, Paul kept close watch on Lucky to make sure that he didn't get bogged down with the complicated gestures or challenging pronunciation.

On and on it went as Paul declared one after another of the variables.

"Okay. How are you doing Lucky? Is everything alright so far?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That was a lot, but I did it." Lucky said happily as he looked at the five-pointed diagram glowing with five little flames.

"This is only the summoning diagram. If you're ready, we can do the next part." Paul said, then waited for a response.

"Are we going to summon Ginh Zah?" Lucky asked curiously.

"That's right. Are you ready?"

"Yeah." Lucky said with renewed enthusiasm.

With that being said, Paul moved on to the next step in the process, which was the actual summoning spell.

Using his magical sight, Paul kept careful watch on how Lucky was doing and got a better sense of what his ability really was.

"That's it. It's open. Go ahead and call for Mah Zah and Ginh Zah. I'm curious to see if they'll come to you." Paul said as he discreetly caused his own portal to close.

"Mah Zah? Ginh Zah? Are you there? It's me, Lucky! Can you come here?" Lucky called into the gray blur hanging in mid air.

After a moment, Paul finally said, "Mah Zah, Ginh Zah, come forth. I summon you."

The pair flew through the passageway on red leathery wings.

"As you can see, Lucky's here. I have a feeling that he has something that he wants to show you." Paul said with a smile.

"Yeah. I want to show you all the new stuff I taught Zah Zah how to do!" Lucky said happily.

"You need to close your portal before you do anything else." Paul reminded him.

"How do I do that?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"It's simple. Just take back the power you used to open it."

"I don't know how to do that. Can you show me?"

Paul made a series of gestures as he carefully said, "What I opened, I now close. What I close, I now seal."

Lucky followed his example and did the same thing. As he did, the smudge in reality faded out of being.

"Before you do anything else, I need to be sure that you understand that you are not to summon anything or open any portals unless I'm with you. This magic is incredibly dangerous and could easily hurt someone if you aren't very careful with it." Paul said seriously.

"Okay. I won't." Lucky promised.

"Good. Go and catch up with Mah Zah and Ginh Zah then. I'm going to go and see how G and Lex are doing."

Lucky needed no further bidding. He immediately turned his attention to the two demons to show off the modifications to the pseudo-demon that he had created.

* * * * *

"How's it going in here?" Paul asked as he walked into G's bedroom.

"I think we're okay. This is going to take some work, but I'm pretty sure we can do it." G said consideringly.

"Is there anything Lucky or I can do to help you?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Not that I can think of, although we might invite Lucky to try his hand at casting the illusion, just to see if he can do it." G said frankly.

"You might want to be careful about that. I just showed Lucky a spell that used infernal magic and he was able to use it just like he'd been born to it." Paul said anxiously.

"It wasn't anything too dangerous, was it?" Lex asked hesitantly.

"I showed him how to summon Mah Zah and Ginh Zah." Paul said cautiously, then waited for the expected reaction.

"I warned you not to do that." G immediately said.

"I know, I know. And I wouldn't have if I could have found out what I needed to know some other way." Paul assured him.

"What did you find out?" Lex asked curiously.

"Back in the dining room I proved that Lucky could use all the primary elements. Just now I proved that he can use magic that's partly or fully derived from the demonic realm." Paul said frankly.

"I wouldn't have even thought of checking for that." Lex said honestly.

"So Lucky knows how to summon demons now. Is that what you're telling us?" G asked cautiously.

"Not exactly. Even though he was able to do the entire spell himself, he doesn't have a contract with Mah Zah and Ginh Zah, so they won't answer his summons."

"Is that why you chose to do that spell?" Lex asked curiously.

"Actually, I wanted to see if Lucky would be able to somehow mimic me and my summons. If he could, that might have opened up a whole other series of things to worry about." Paul said frankly.

"But you said he couldn't do it. Right?" G asked cautiously.

"Right." Paul confirmed, then added, "Of course, Lucky doesn't know the first thing about using or controlling his ability. Who's to say if, given enough time, he'll be able to mimic the magic of the pact with my familiars or not?"

"Excuse me for being ignorant, but why would it be so bad if he could summon Mah Zah and Ginh Zah? I don't see the problem." Lex reluctantly admitted.

"One word... Security."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me? Because I have no idea how Lucky being able to summon your familiars would make a difference in how secure you or anyone else should feel." G said frankly.

"Let's back up to what Dad was saying about you creating Lex. He said that if they figured out that you could make air elementals whenever you wanted that they'd have to take steps to keep you from doing that." Paul carefully explained.

"Yeah. Curses or counselling. Sounds like fun." G said dryly.

"And then here comes Lucky who can do *everything* that you can do plus anything else that anyone he's ever met can do." Paul continued.

"When you put it that way, that doesn't sound too good." Lex reluctantly admitted.

"Yeah. And if he can use my demonic magic and mine and Mom's summoning abilities, he might even be able to make a traversable portal and flood the world with demons." Paul said anxiously.

"You don't really think that Lucky would do something like that, do you?" G asked curiously.

"I just saw him open a door without knowing how to close it. I mean, I was there and I made sure that he closed it correctly, but that doesn't change the fact that he has the *ability* to use any of our magic without having the experience or the background knowledge of how to use it *responsibly*." Paul said urgently.

"Okay. I get that. But what were you saying about security?" Lex asked curiously.

"Back in Scotland, the vault with all the silver was cursed so that no one could go in there who wasn't supposed to. If Lucky ever saw someone rescind or circumvent the curse, then he could mimic that magic and have full access to the vault whenever he wanted." Paul said seriously.

"Yeah. I can see that." G said slowly.

Lex nodded his agreement.

"If one of us were cursed to prevent us from summoning demons or creating new elementals, Lucky could mimic our magic to circumvent the curse." Paul said frankly.

"So what you're basically saying is that Lucky could be used to bypass the magical limits on just about anything." Lex said thoughtfully.

"Right." Paul agreed, then added, "Now think of what would happen if someone who doesn't care very much about following the rules found out about Lucky. There are people in the world who don't care who gets hurt as long as they get what they want. What do you think someone like that would force Lucky to do for them?"

"You're jumping to a lot of conclusions based on very little actual evidence." G said in a tone of warning.

"I know. And I don't really believe that any of that will happen. But I think it's important for us to understand just how dangerous Lucky's magical ability really is. It puts a price on his head and a target on his back. The time may come when it's up to *us* to protect him." Paul said frankly.

"Or protect the world *from* him." Lex muttered under his breath.

"If Kyla is a magic thief, then that probably means that Lucky wouldn't have an opportunity to mimic her. As far as I know, Star hasn't shown any sign of having any magical ability at all. I don't know what Lucky's home life is like, but since he's been going to an elementary school with younger kids, he might not have had an opportunity to mimic anyone else's magic before he got to hang around with us." G said speculatively.

"So in a way, everything that happens to Lucky from here on out is partially our fault. If we didn't try to include him and show him how to use magic in new ways then he'd probably be at his old school with his old friends being perfectly happy." Paul said seriously.

"No. Ignorance isn't bliss. It's just ignorance. Even if he ends up having problems, he's better off learning how to deal with the challenges that his magic brings instead of never facing it." Lex said with certainty.

A movement caught all their attention and before Paul could ask what was going on, Ginh Zah quickly meowed.

"C'mon. Something's wrong with Lucky." Paul said as he hurried past Ginh Zah out of the room.

Lex and G immediately followed.

When Paul emerged into the living room, he stopped and stared.

Mah Zah was barking something at Paul as G and Lex arrived in the room and stopped on either side of Paul.

"Okay..." G finally said as he began to process what he was seeing.

"Ginh Zah says that she and Mah Zah changed from their demon forms into their 'natural world' forms and she thinks that Lucky tried to mimic their magic and got stuck like this." Paul said slowly.

"How did he end up as a unicorn?" Lex asked weakly.

"A pegasus. A unicorn has a horn." Paul automatically corrected.

"Whatever. How did him doing the spell that makes Mah Zah a puppy turn him into a winged horse?" Lex asked disbelievingly.

"Do you think it would somehow be better if Lucky were a puppy instead?" G asked seriously.

"No. Not really." Lex admitted.

"We need to fix this." Paul said simply.

"How?" Lex asked helplessly.

"We'll figure something out." Paul responded uncertainly.

"Maybe we should get Mom and Dad." G cautiously suggested.

"No. At least, not yet. Let's try to fix this ourselves first and if that doesn't work, *then* we'll get them." Paul promised.

"I don't even know where to start." G said honestly.

"Lucky. Listen to me. I need for you to follow along with Mah Zah and do the same spell that she does. Follow along with her exactly and with any luck, you'll undo what you just did." Paul said firmly.

The pegasus colt nodded his head in agreement.

"Good." Paul said with relief at his apparent understanding, then turned his attention toward Mah Zah and said, "I need for you to change back to your demon form. If you can, do it slowly enough so that Lucky can follow along with you."

Mah Zah let loose one little yip, then appeared to be chasing her tail.

Lucky watched for a moment, then appeared to be doing the same thing, trying to chase his tail in a counterclockwise circle.

"Good. Good." Paul said slowly as he watched with his magical vision.

"What do you see?" Lex asked curiously.

"The magic is working. I can see the balance of forces stretching and skewing." Paul said in a low voice.

"So, is Lucky going to change back?" G asked anxiously.

"I'm pretty sure he's going to change. Into what... your guess is as good as mine." Paul said honestly.

Before they could speculate any further, the colt suddenly seemed to fold in upon itself and almost tie itself into a knot.

After a moment where the animal seemed to have turned itself inside out, Lucky's natural form began to emerge from the horsehair ball.

"Welcome back!" Paul said with relief as he stepped forward and pulled Lucky into a hug.

"Hold on. Something's not right here." G said firmly.

"What do you mean? Lucky's back. Everything's fine." Paul insisted.

"He changed fully into an animal then back to his natural body and his clothes didn't get torn up. It doesn't work that way." G said firmly.

"No. That's right. I showed Lucky the clothes changing spell first thing when we got back to the room. Lucky just proved that the spell I taught him worked." Paul said happily.

"So, are you saying that even though you didn't plan any of this, you somehow showed Lucky how to do a clothes changing spell less than an hour before he *accidently* changed himself into a pegasus?" G asked challengingly.

"Um. Yeah. Pretty much." Paul said as he released Lucky from the hug, but kept one arm wrapped loosely around his shoulders.

"Lucky? Are you alright?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That was kinda scary, but I knew that you guys wouldn't let me stay stuck like that, so I knew that I'd be okay." Lucky said confidently.

"I'm just glad that we didn't disappoint you." Paul said honestly.

"Did you figure out how to change Lex to not look like G yet?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"No. We're not all as quick to learn shapeshifting as you are." Paul chuckled.

"Besides that, I think we're going to have a lot more detail work than you had to bother with. If you'll remember, Lex was crafted wearing clothes. That means that underneath, he doesn't have any... defining features." G hesitantly finished.

"Hey! Not cool! I don't talk about your junk in front of everyone!" Lex said with offence.

"We're all friends here Lex. And if we're going to get your situation resolved, it's probably going to take all of us working together. That is, unless you two want to be up till the wee hours of the morning working on it." Paul said simply.

"Why can't we just give you the basics and work on the details over the weekend?" G cautiously suggested.

"Would you want to go to school to get introduced to everyone and just have 'the basics'?" Lex asked challengingly.

"Listen, you guys know all about the sorcery stuff. I think that I've proven that I can come up with some good ideas every now and then. Lucky seems to have the ability to mimic anyone's magic, so I can think of a few ways that he could help us out, and to top it off, we have *two* demonic wizards who shapeshift just about every day. Let's go ahead and put our heads together and knock this thing out." Paul said encouragingly.

"Okay, I guess when you put it that way, that it *does* make sense. What choice do I have?" G finished with a grudging smile.

"Yeah. You'd say that. You're not the one whose junk is going to be hanging out in front of everyone so that it can be crafted into a 'final form'." Lex said uncomfortably.

"Actually, if you think about it, in a way, it *is* my junk that everyone is going to be looking at." G said informatively.

"Who here hasn't already seen G's junk?" Paul asked loudly.

No one answered.

There weren't even any meows or barks to be considered.

After a long silent moment to punctuate the response, or lack thereof, Paul quietly said, "Then I think we have a plan."

Chapter 4

"Before we get too into this, I'm just wondering if there isn't already, like, a... template or something for the construction of a human illusion?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah, of course there is. I mean, it's generic as hell and it's just got a bump between its legs, but it's got a lot of built-in options that you can dial up or down, however you like." G said simply.

"Then why aren't you using one of those?" Paul asked cautiously, just in case he was missing some obvious reason.

"Because then it wouldn't be *my* work. That'd be like painting a new face on someone else's portrait." G fought to explain.

"You've already got your grade and Lex needs to be ready to go in the morning. Is there any reason you can't just stick his head on a new body, slap a cock on him, then shrink him down to Lucky's size?" Paul asked seriously.

"Um.... yeah. I guess I could do the body easily enough, I mean, just go through his spell definition and copy-paste his naked body stats over those of his clothed body." G said thoughtfully.

"How long's that going to take?" Paul asked seriously.

"Not long, once we've found the body form that we want to use." G said consideringly as he glanced at Lex.

"Lex, do you already know what kind of body you want?" Paul asked simply.

"There's this one called 'Alfie 3' that I noticed. It's got kind of a long lean look but it doesn't really catch your eye as being too sexy or athletic or anything. It looked about right to me." Lex said honestly.

"Do you have everything you need to do the body thing?" Paul asked insistently, not indicating to whom his question was directed.

"You want to do it right now?" G asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Why not? Do you get some kind of extra credit for dragging it out until the very last minute?" Paul asked in return.

"I'm beginning to see the demon summoner side of you." G muttered as he led the way out of the living area and into the bedchamber where the computer alcove was located.

The others looked at each other and reached silent consensus before following along.

* * * * *

As G walked to his computer and began to search through the file menus, Paul quietly told Lucky, "If you get into the habit of waiting till later to do things, you'll end up not doing anything at all."

"You need to show me how to get things done like you do. I think it might be a more important thing to learn than the magic." Lucky said thoughtfully.

"I don't know if it's something that I can teach. I learned from Mom working all the time leaving me mostly on my own. If I didn't do it, it didn't get done." Paul said frankly, then continued more gently, "I tell you what, just as soon as we've got things sorted out with G and Lex, we'll work on finding something to put you in charge of so that you can get some practice running things. It may not be exactly the same, but I think that learning how to organize supplies, your time, and even other people will teach you just about the same lessons... and it's not nearly as lonely as what I went through."

Ginh Zah loosed a long meow that trailed off into a purr.

After a moment to consider, Paul finally admitted, "I don't know. I'll ask."

Lucky waited with interest to find out what Ginh Zah wanted to know.

"Lex, Ginh Zah wants to know if you want to have an unclothed form for some specific reason, or if it's just because you want to be like everyone else." Paul said seriously.

"I *do* want to be like everyone else, but I don't know if *that* has anything to do with *this*. Even though my logical mind knows the truth, when I look back on my life, I see myself as being a flesh and blood person. I don't know how to exist as an illusionary mass of magic." Lex said honestly, then quietly added, "And to tell you the truth, right this minute, I don't want to know."

"So, you want to be a person. I totally get that." Paul said seriously.

"Good, because I don't know how else to explain it." Lex said honestly.

"You explained it fine." Paul assured him.

"I've got the specs up for 'Alfie 3' on the screen if you want to give this thing a try." G announced.

"Let me grab a robe or something to put on. I don't want to be standing around here with my junk hanging out." Lex said as he walked toward the bathroom.

"There won't be any junk until we reach the next phase." G reminded him.

"That's even more of a reason I don't want everyone looking at me." Lex said anxiously.

Paul recognized Lex's expression and quietly promised, "We won't."

* * * * *

Paul had previously noticed that the performance of a 'foreign' spell wasn't quite as interesting to him as a spell performed in his own specialty, although there was still some entertainment value in it. However, witnessing a 'foreign' spell being read aloud from a computer screen seemed to hold the same level of excitement as watching corporate lawyers discussing the minutiae of copyright law.

Finally, after an excruciating barrage of dry definitions, Lex's body transformed in the blink of an eye. One minute he was standing amongst them dressed in casual clothes. The next, he was standing before them stark naked... and quite obviously neuter.

After a long moment, Lucky held out Lex's robe to him and quietly said, "Here."

"Thanks." Lex said absently as he accepted the robe into his hand, but made no move to put it on.

"Is everything alright?" G asked with concern at his lack of reaction.

"It doesn't feel like me." Lex said slowly as he flexed the fingers of his free hand.

"I really wouldn't expect it to. The other you was made completely by me. Every part of it was made with a purpose and was there by choice. The body you're wearing now has a lot of built-in options that I didn't need to include." G carefully explained.

"I guess that makes sense." Lex said reluctantly as he mulled over what he was feeling.

"Once you get settled in and have made a few decisions, we can do away with some of the optional bits and you'll feel more and more like 'you'." G said seriously.

"Does any of that need to be done right now?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. In fact, removing the options too early could end up being a big mistake. Erasing something is a whole lot easier than going back and adding it back in later." G said frankly.

"Good. Then do you have a box of penises around here somewhere for Lex to choose from?" Paul asked with a teasing smile.

"Yeah. Right over there, beside the bed." G answered as he turned away from the computer and pointed.

"Seriously?" Paul asked with surprise.

"No! Not seriously! I can't believe that you'd even ask me that!" G said as he fought to stifle a laugh.

"You had me worried for a second." Paul said honestly.

"Lex, do you already know which style of penis you'd like to have?" G asked seriously.

"As much as I'd like to get something... memorable, I really don't want to draw too much attention to myself in the locker room." Lex said consideringly as he finally pulled on the robe that Lucky had given him.

"Did you have any particular style in mind?" Paul asked curiously.

"Actually, I was thinking that in this, it might be one time when I *choose to* mimic G." Lex said slowly.

"I guess he can take that as a compliment." Paul said with a grin in G's direction.

"He can if he wants to." Lex was quick to interject, then he explained more slowly, "I don't really have an opinion either way on what G's got. I think I'd like it because I'm just kinda used to it. With all the changes in my life... my state of being, I think it might be nice to have one or two things that feel familiar to me."

"I think I get what you're feeling." G assured him, then continued, "If you'll give me a second to dial up the specs on this, then I should be able to get you fixed up in just a few minutes." G said confidently.

"Thanks. I was afraid that you'd think I was being stupid."

"Nope. In choosing to be yourself, you're deciding what 'being yourself' means. There's nothing stupid about that at all." Paul assured him.

Ginh Zah loosed an inquisitive meow, then waited for Paul to relay her question.

"You may have more options than you realize. Ginh Zah wanted me to remind you that you aren't human, or even a witch." Paul said frankly.

"I hadn't thought of that." Lex cautiously admitted.

Ginh Zah mewed sweetly, then focused on Lex with large innocent eyes.

"She was just thinking that you might consider something barbed." Paul said slowly, looking at his familiar uncertainly.

"If things end up going well with Corabeth, that might turn out to be an inconvenience. Besides, I can always go back and make alterations later if my situation changes." Lex said carefully.

Ginh Zah didn't react to his decision but, at the same time, didn't appear to be displeased.

"Have you considered becoming Jewish?" G asked from in front of his computer.

"Not really." Lex said honestly.

"Okay. I just thought it might be a good time to ask." G said casually from in front of the computer screen.

"Yeah. I get it. Um, no. Thanks." Lex said awkwardly.

"Then I guess this is about ready. Do you want to look it over?" G asked as he scooted away from the screen.

"If you think it looks right, I'd rather just go with it. In a sense, you're my creator. I think I'd feel better if we stuck to *your* vision of me." Lex said frankly.

"I'll do my best not to disappoint you." G said quietly, and sounded to be a little choked up.

Before Lex could think of anything to say in response, G began casting his definition spell, slightly redefining 'what' Lex was as well as how he was to appear.

"Do you think you could do that?" Paul asked Lucky quietly.

"No. I mean, yes, maybe. I don't think I could do what G is doing right now because he's changing something that's already been made. He isn't casting a spell, he's remaking it from the inside. That's something I've never done before. But as far as the magic and the words and stuff, yeah, I could probably do it." Lucky said uneasily.

"Changing a spell that's already been cast without dispelling it can be a little tricky. Unless you know the spell inside and out and know without a doubt that the change you're making won't impact another part of the spell badly, it's probably best if you dispel it, modify the written spell, then recast." Paul said seriously.

"You wouldn't be saying that if you were the one being 'dispelled'." Lex informed him.

"Probably not." Paul admitted, then added more quietly, "Nothing personal."

"No. What you're telling him is right. If you're not a master and intimately familiar with the spell, it's better to recast than potentially corrupt the spell and release unstable magic into the world." Lex said seriously.

"So is Lex a spell or a person?" Lucky asked uncertainly.

Before Lex could answer, Paul quickly said, "He's both... or maybe he started as one thing and is becoming the other. It's kinda hard to say."

Lex considered a moment, then nodded his agreement before explaining, "Part of who I am existed within G, I could see through his eyes, learned his lessons, and experienced through him what it's like to be alive. Then one day I became myself. That's the magic. That's the spell. But what I am, *who* I am, is something that existed before the spell that made me was cast. I don't know if I can explain it more than that, but I know that it's true. I can *feel* it."

There was a long moment of silence before Paul finally said, "Considering the abilities that Dad and Grandpa J have, it wouldn't surprise me a bit to find out that

G has a little clutch of 'soul eggs' gestating deep inside him somewhere, all ready and waiting for him to bring another one of his illusionary creations to life."

"Great. Now I'm going to have nightmares." G said flatly, then turned to Lex and said, "Lex, check that out and see what you think."

Lex peeked inside his robe and smiled with surprise at what he found there.

"I'm guessing you did it right." Paul said with a smile at Lex's apparent approval of G's work.

"Are you going to make Lex my size now?" Lucky asked hopefully.

Before anyone had a chance to answer, Mah Zah interrupted with a stern bark.

Paul, who had been about to respond to Lucky's question, instead turned slightly to look at Mah Zah consideringly.

"She may be right." G said uncertainly.

"I don't really know enough about it to be able to say for sure either way, but my *instinct* tells me that she's on the right track." Paul said slowly.

"What's going on?" Lex asked curiously.

"Mah Zah was just saying that if this is going to be your 'resting' form, then the next thing we need to establish is your full-out transformation form. If we don't set that now, you risk making your temporary state your permanent extreme magical form. According to Mah Zah, your extreme magical form needs to be rigged to channel intense magic. Your temporary form should be rigged to be more of a container with built-in safeguards to prevent accidental magical leakage." Paul explained.

"I've studied the same things that G has and I've never heard of that." Lex said warily.

Mah Zah barked, then Paul slowly nodded before translating, "This has to do with 'creating' life. Only the highest level sorcerers would be likely to know about stuff like this."

"Is Mah Zah a high level sorcerer?" Lucky asked seriously.

Mah Zah barked in response, then Paul translated, "She's a demonic wizard with centuries of practical experience. She's picked up a few things in her travels."

"So what do I need to do?" Lex asked cautiously.

Mah Zah barked and whimpered her response, then looked to Paul to translate. Before he could do so, G told the group, "Mah Zah says that we need to craft an extreme magical form for Lex and rig it for his preferred style of combat."

"What does that mean?" Lucky asked curiously.

"Basically it means that if he defends himself with brute strength, then he might take on the form of something like an ogre. If he defends himself more with weapons he'll be set up for that, if it's more about some particular magic, then he'll probably get something that works well with that." G explained, then thought to add, "Like if he had ice spells, then he might become a frost giant."

"If that's how it works, what does it mean that my magical form is a Pegasus?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I don't know. Maybe it means that you're strong, fast, powerful... not easy to overcome." Paul said speculatively.

"What do we have to go through to figure out what kind of spirit animal or whatever it is that I'm supposed to have?" Lex asked slowly.

Mah Zah barked, then Paul and G exchanged a look.

"What?" Lex asked uneasily.

"She says that you can agonize over it if you want to, but it probably won't make much of a difference. All you really have to do is pick something and stick to it." Paul said frankly.

"So I don't have to pick a form related to the air element or anything like that?" Lex asked to be sure.

"You *could*. But you don't have to. The rest of us get the luck of the draw for our magical forms and then we can assign whatever meanings we can devise to justify them. You get to pick. I guess that you're the only one who can decide just how big of a deal that is." G said seriously.

Lex looked at Lucky for a moment, then turned to G and asked, "Do you think we can rig up a unicorn in a reasonable amount of time?"

"I'm not sure. I remember seeing a unicorn construct in one of my old textbooks. Give me a minute to see if I can find it." G said as he hurried to the bookcase just outside the computer alcove.

"Really?" Lucky asked Lex hopefully.

"Yeah. I was thinking that if we're going to be sharing a room and going to school together, then it'd probably be good if we had something in common with each other that we don't have with anyone else." Lex quietly explained.

"That sounds really great." Lucky said with a smile.

"We can do this." G said with a textbook open in his hands.

"What do we have to do?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Mainly, figure out how and where your magic is going to be channeled in an attack situation." G answered seriously.

"How long is that going to take?" Paul asked cautiously.

"As long as it takes." G said frankly, then explained, "But once the decisions have been made, implementing them isn't all that difficult."

"Do unicorns have any magical defensive channels already built in?" Lex asked cautiously.

"I really don't know, it doesn't talk about that in the book. Let me look at the spell design." G said as he started leafing through pages of his book.

"Remember, unicorns are pure nature. They aren't native to this realm. You may have to make some adjustments for that." Paul cautioned.

"My book is from this realm, so it automatically assumes that everything takes place using this dimension's magical laws." G assured him.

"At least there's that." Paul said with some small measure of relief.

"Here we go... from the look of this, unicorns are hard-wired to channel a fairly high level of magic. I'd guess from this configuration that the most effective attacks

would be magically augmented speed and strength and concussive blast attacks. Everything you need is all hardwired into the construct. You'll just have to learn the spells." G said slowly as he fought to continue to read while giving his summary.

"Okay. Then I suppose the next question is, do we know how to establish Lex's extreme magical form?" Paul asked cautiously.

"That is so far beyond my understanding that I can't even *guess* at how to do it." G said honestly.

Mah Zah barked once, and even to those who couldn't understand her language, she sounded confident.

"If you're sure..." G trailed off.

Mah Zah barked one more time, then whimpered.

"Lex, if you'll let Mah Zah take control of your magical flow for a couple minutes, she'd like to conduct your part of the ritual while she talks me through my part." G slowly explained.

"Take control?" Lex cautiously asked.

"Lend her your magic and she'll use it to alter your form." Paul paraphrased.

"I guess that doesn't sound too bad." Lex said hesitantly.

"You'll be giving up control of your magic to a literal demon. Even though she's Paul's familiar, you still need to be aware of what a big step it is." G said frankly.

Mah Zah barked a brief statement in her defense.

"If Dad taught me anything, it's to see past people's words and judge them for themselves." G said seriously as he looked Mah Zah directly in the eyes, then continued, "I judge you to be sincere in your desire to help and useful toward reaching our mutual goal. I will trust you... that much. But you wouldn't respect me if I were gullible enough to believe everything you said to me just because you're cute."

Mah Zah yipped once and it was easily interpreted by all present as being a verification of G's contention.

"So, what do we do now?" Lex asked cautiously.

Mah Zah quickly barked instructions for the coming spell.

"She's going to need to sit on your shoulder or on top of your head." Paul informed him.

"Now?" Lex asked anxiously.

"Unless you've made another commitment that you haven't told us about." Paul said with a grin.

"You can really be a dick sometimes." Lex said with annoyance.

"Yeah. But only with my closest friends and family... take a minute to think about that." Paul said with a slight smile behind the words.

Lex looked around the group of boys, his brothers, and smiled as he realized what Paul was saying.

"Come on up here. We need to get this thing going so that you and Paul can get back to working on your master plan." Lex said as he picked up the little black puppy.

After a moment to try and comprehend what Lex might mean, Paul cautiously asked, "My plan?"

"To take over the world!" Lex said theatrically.

"*They're Pinky, they're Pinky and the Brain*!" G sang maniacally.

"Mah Zah, why don't you help this goof gain his magical form now." Paul chuckled.

The little black dog with the white patch of fur around her left eye settled in on top of Lex's head. Once she seemed to be fixed into place, she began to bark and whimper instructions.

"Lex, you're going to need to lend her your magic. Give up complete control, so that she'll be able to use it as if it were her own." Paul quietly explained.

"Can't she use her own magic?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"She needs to perform this spell with elemental air and she's a demon. She doesn't have access to this element on her own. I'd offer to help, but air is one of my

secondary abilities. It wouldn't be strong enough to make the spell stick." Paul patiently explained.

"Is what Mah Zah is doing something like what I do with my magic?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"I'm not sure." Paul said honestly, then explained, "You can mimic other people's magic, but I still haven't figured out if you're borrowing some of *their* magic or if your magic somehow adapts to act like theirs."

"Mah Zah, I'm ready when you are." G said confidently.

"I'm open wide here, so do what you're going to do." Lex said anxiously.

"Lucky, why don't you and Zah Zah come over here by me so we won't run the risk of getting caught in their magical fallout. I have a feeling that they're about to let loose with something big." Paul said as he backed toward the bedroom doorway.

Lucky picked up Zah Zah and took the few steps to join him.

There was a sudden 'meow', then Ginh Zah began to run in tight circles around Lex's feet.

"Ginh Zah is worried about the fallout too, so she's putting up a containment spell to isolate Lex." Paul translated.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"I think all we can do is stand by until we're needed for something." Paul said honestly.

"Actually, Lucky can help us with inspiration." Lex said seriously.

"How's that?" Paul asked curiously as Lucky listened with interest.

"Think about what we're *trying* to do and then think about what Lucky *can* do. Seeing it might help to *inspire* G to do his best work." Lex said seriously.

"What do you think, G? Will it help?"

"It won't hurt. Go ahead and do what you're going to do. I'm just about ready." G said firmly.

Mah Zah barked and Paul relayed, "Mah Zah's just about ready too."

"Can you transform yourself like you did before?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think so." Lucky said uncertainly.

"Go on ahead and if all goes well, I'll be joining you in a few minutes." Lex said encouragingly.

"Is this going to help you?" Lucky asked as he placed Zah Zah on the floor beside him.

"Yes. Not only will you be showing me how it's done, but you'll also be helping G to get a sense of scale and form a vision of how my magical form should look." Lex said seriously.

"Okay. It's just... I've only done this once and I got stuck when I did it." Lucky said nervously.

"Yeah. But we didn't leave you stuck, did we? Mah Zah and Gihn Zah showed you how to come back. If it happens again, I can help show you too." Lex carefully explained, then quietly added, "Or if I get stuck, maybe you could show *me* the way back."

Lucky seemed to scrape all his resolve into one monumental burst of magical effort as, from a standstill, he abruptly changed from an average looking boy into a young winged horse.

"He made that look easy." Lex said, sounding impressed.

"Then I guess it's time for us to get you set up so it isn't wasted effort." Paul said slowly.

"Yeah. Let's do this." Lex said as he closed his eyes.

"Ready." G announced.

Mah Zah barked once in the affirmative.

"Here it goes."

* * * * *

Mah Zah tilted her head back and released a long sustained howl worthy of any wolf twice her size.

While she was doing so, G began to read the words of the spell from his computer screen while also performing complex gestures in the air, directed toward Lex.

Ginh Zah was still running in circles, creating a protective barrier to shield the others in the event that Mah Zah lost control of Lex's transformation or Lex spontaneously exploded, either of which were possible outcomes of the spells being performed.

"You know, if we never went on that 'work study' project, I wouldn't recognize what you were doing there, but that's some really nice barrier work, Ginh Zah." Paul said appreciatively.

Lucky, in his Pegasus form, slowly spread his wings as he watched what Mah Zah was doing.

"Water into air. Air into water. Let two houses combine and retain the memory of what it was to be separate." Paul said firmly as a spell diagram appeared on the floor beneath Lex and Mah Zah.

G spared him a curious glance, but was experienced enough to know not to stop in the middle of a spell.

"Water withdraw from air. Air release water. Let both retain the fluidic nature that they share. Grant them access to the traits of each other's house, diminishing neither." Paul intoned as the spell diagram faded slightly, then reformed into another configuration.

As Paul had hoped, Ginh Zah understood what he was doing and immediately took up the task of slightly altering Lex's elemental essence.

After a long moment of staring and trying to comprehend what he was seeing, Lex finally asked, "What are you doing to me?"

"Because of my demonic magic or maybe because of our recent barrier work I was able to see a flaw in the spells being cast. With one teeny tiny little alchemical alteration I was able to tweak your physiology just enough to give you a more or less corporeal form." Paul carefully explained.

"I thought I already had one." Lex said slowly.

"I thought so too." Paul said honestly, then explained, "But from a magical standpoint, your solid form was created, and has been sustained by elemental air...

which is fine, except that it's possible to become disconnected from a primary element. You can think of it as putting all your eggs in one basket."

"So what are you saying? If I went underground or scuba diving, that I might cease to exist?" Lex asked uncertainly.

"No. Probably not. But there's no telling what *could* disconnect you. In your pure sylph state all it would take is to lose your connection for a second. That could completely destroy you, and we might never be able to get you back." Paul said frankly.

"But you fixed it?" Lex asked hopefully, beginning to understand the scale of what Paul was trying to explain to him.

"I think so. I basically made a tiny change in your primary essence to allow you a link to a secondary magic. I linked you to elemental water... think of it as being like a battery backup."

"So that would keep me from disappearing if I lost my link to the air?"

"Possibly. But if something that magically catastrophic happened, you might still end up winking out. Doing it this way, at least there'd be a chance that you might wink back in or that we would have *some* way of retrieving you."

"Thanks for thinking of that." Lex said timidly.

Mah Zah barked abruptly, drawing their attention.

"Yeah. Go ahead. We were just entertaining ourselves until you were ready." Paul said warmly.

Mah Zah looked at him dubiously, but didn't dignify his assertion with a response except to explain, in yips and growls, what was about to happen.

"Lex, the redefinition should be kicking in any second. Don't worry if it doesn't feel right at first, it'll smooth out as G finishes his casting." Paul said carefully.

"I understand how it works." Lex assured him.

"Knowing the mechanics and actually living through it aren't always the same thing." Paul said seriously.

Before Lex could respond, his body drastically transformed.

Lucky stomped his front hooves anxiously, obviously trying to restrain his escalating worry.

"He'll be fine. Everything's going exactly the way it's supposed to." Paul said soothingly.

Ginh Zah finally veered away from Lex and came to a full stop at Paul's feet.

Without hesitation, Paul picked her up and placed her on his left shoulder.

As Ginh Zah was fighting to catch her breath, Paul quietly asked, "Would you like a portal so you can go home and get a drink?"

Ginh Zah meowed once, not demonstrating any of the playfulness that she usually did.

"Okay. I'm sure Mah Zah will be joining you in just a minute. It looks like she's almost done."

Ginh Zah meowed once, then dropped from Paul's shoulder, shapeshifting in mid-air into her winged-lizard form.

In a blur of movement, Ginh Zah glided fluidly and effortlessly through the gray blur in reality at Paul's feet.

* * * * *

G's spellcasting came to a stop and Paul looked at him quizzically for a moment, since Lex still seemed to be in a transitional state.

"Wait for it." G said confidently.

Paul nodded, then took a step toward the young Pegasus and petted his silky soft mane to try and help to soothe his nerves.

Mah Zah suddenly barked, then jumped off Lex's head just as he seemed to be settling into a final form.

Paul watched as Mah Zah transformed into a winged-lizard, then zipped through the portal that Paul had left open for her.

"How are you doing, Lex?" Paul asked cautiously as he looked at the young unicorn with concern.

Lex made a slight neigh, then looked at Paul with puzzlement.

"Nod if you're okay." Paul said carefully.

The unicorn quickly nodded, then seemed to go cross-eyed for a moment, trying to focus in on his horn.

"You'll get used to it." G assured him with a chuckle.

Lucky made a noise, then waited for a response.

Paul and G both waited, and were happy when Lex responded positively.

After a few neighs and whinnys between them, Paul finally interrupted, "You guys can compare notes later. Right now, Lucky, why don't you show Lex how to change back to your resting forms?"

G looked at Paul with a smile for thinking to give Lucky the responsibility and honor of helping Lex.

After a few puffs and snorts and one slight whinny, Lucky began to turn in tight circles, like he was trying to chase his own tail.

After a moment, Lex began to mimic Lucky's performance.

Paul and G moved fully into the computer alcove to get out of their way as Paul said, "Keep after it. I can see it working."

First Lucky, and a moment later Lex, smoothly transitioned to their bipedal forms.

"That was really something." Lex said breathlessly, then panted for a long quiet moment.

"Good job, Lucky." Paul finally said, so that it was acknowledged in front of everyone.

"Here's your robe." G said quietly as he handed it to his naked twin.

"You need a clothes changing spell so you don't have to get naked to change. I already learned one. I can teach it to you, if you want." Lucky said proudly.

Lex tiredly smiled at the younger boy's enthusiasm and said, "Yeah, Lucky. I think I'd like that."

Chapter 5

"Before we get too much into the clothes changing thing, maybe we should make sure that Lex can make himself smaller. If he can't, the rest is kinda pointless." Paul cautiously suggested.

"Lex? Do you need my help, or do you think you can do it yourself?" G asked seriously.

"I think I can get it. Do you have any problem with me just aging myself down a few years?" Lex asked cautiously as he loosened the sash on his robe.

"No. That sounds right. Let's just see how you look before we call anything decided." G responded professionally.

"Before anyone says it, this might end up looking a little weird. Hands and feet don't always age down at the same rate as the rest of the body. I'll work on fine tuning once I've settled in on a final form." Lex cautioned them.

"You were a horse a couple minutes ago. I doubt that I'd even notice if your feet were big." Paul said honestly.

"Just do it. I'm about to pass out." G implored his twin.

"I'm going to have to do the long version of the spell. I'm too tired to be able to concentrate on doing it the silent way." Lex said honestly.

"Would it make it easier if I made diagrams for you or something?" Paul cautiously asked.

"No. I've got everything I need." Lex said confidently, then began to cast his spell, careful to enunciate clearly.

* * * * *

"Do you think I could use a spell like that to make myself look older?" Lucky quietly asked Paul as they watched Lex performing the spoken long version of his spell.

"I don't think so. From the way I understand it, Lex can change himself with a spell like this one because his shape was originally defined with sorcery. It probably wouldn't work the same on you. In fact, it probably wouldn't work at all." Paul said slowly as he watched what Lex was doing, trying to make some sense of it.

"The only way it would work is if we encased you in an illusion, then the spell that Lex is using could change how people see you." G said informatively as he also maintained the majority of his attention on what Lex was doing.

"We might try that sometime, just to see how it works out." Paul said with a grin.

"I'd be interested to see if Lucky would be able to cast a high-level sorcery like that." G said honestly.

Before anyone could say anything more, Lex began to shrink.

There was a long moment of silence before Paul finally said, "Okay. That's just freaky."

"Did I get something wrong?" Lex asked with concern, then took on an expression of surprise at the higher pitched, 'younger' sound of his voice.

Paul glanced down at Lex's perfectly normal looking feet for an instant before answering, "No. It's just weird seeing you looking more like G than G does."

"What does that even mean?" G asked curiously.

"Whenever you do something brilliant or really funny, this is the way I see you. This is what's behind your maturity and the image you work to put forward for everyone to see. This is the real you that I love so much." Paul said with a gesture at Lex.

"Yeah. Hang on. Hold that thought." Lex said tursely as he made a quick series of gestures.

Paul stared at Lex's altered appearance but didn't react otherwise.

"Who's that? He looks familiar, but I can't quite place him." G finally asked.

"Can't you guess?" Lex asked playfully.

"I'm about twenty seconds from laying down on that bed right there and letting you get your own stuff ready for school tomorrow." G said frankly.

"You don't have to be crabby about it." Lex said with a sideways glance at G, then continued, "My features are half-way between 'young G' and Lucky."

"So that way you look like a member of the family, but you don't look 'exactly' like any one person?" Paul slowly reasoned.

"That's the plan." Lex confirmed, then cautiously asked, "But how does it look?"

"Why don't you go into the bathroom and see for yourself?" G asked reasonably.

"Because I want to get it as close as I can doing it this way, before I move on to the 'fine tuning' stage. It's easy to get lost in the detail work. If this doesn't work, then I'll scrap it and try something else... maybe I'll try reverse aging Dad... I mean D."

"Just go ahead and call him dad. He's already accepted you." G said simply.

"Take it from one who knows, calling him dad makes him really happy. Holding off until you're sure you're ready will only leave you feeling regret for the time that you wasted." Paul said firmly.

"Lex, if you're waiting for my approval of your disguise, you've got it. As far as I'm concerned, you guys are my Cousin Lex and Cousin Lucky who've come to live with us cause Dad's got money and the schools here are better than what they've got back where you come from... wherever that is." G said seriously.

"I'm from Virginia, if that helps." Lucky quietly contributed.

"I guess that I can be from Virginia, too. I can be from there as easily as being from anywhere else. Anything's got to work better than the truth." Lex said reasonably.

"Can you remember how you did it? I mean, will you be able to change back to Cousin Lex in the morning, or do you need to write it down or something?" Paul asked cautiously.

"G minus four years, then add in half a Lucky. It may take a few times doing it for me to cement the fine details into place, but the basic recipe isn't that hard to remember." Lex said consideringly.

"Good. Then what about clothes? How are we going to handle that?" Paul asked seriously.

"I guess that since I'm this size, I should borrow something of Lucky's." Lex said hesitantly, obviously not thrilled with the resolution.

"If you go back to your full size and put on one of our uniforms, then you could use Lucky's clothes altering spell and size yourself back down." Paul carefully suggested.

Lex thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head as he reluctantly said, "If I did that, then Lucky would be the only one without a uniform. In fact, he'd probably be the only one in the whole school in civilian clothes."

"While that's true, I don't know if there's anything we can do to fix that." G said honestly.

"If it comes down to it, I'll borrow some of Lucky's clothes for tomorrow and we'll both go to school like that until we both have uniforms." Lex said firmly.

Paul turned to G and quietly asked, "Do you think you could make an illusionary uniform?"

"I've never tried, but I'm sure that I could. But there's no way that I could sustain an illusion like that for an entire day. In fact, it would probably fade away as soon as I'm out of their presence." G said seriously.

"Right. But if you could do that, then Lex probably could too." Paul said in a leading tone.

"Do you not remember all that we've just gone through so I wouldn't have to go to school in illusionary clothes?" Lex asked slowly, prompting Paul to explain his reasoning.

"Just hear me out." Paul hurriedly implored, then explained more slowly, "If you can whip up a uniform, then Lucky can probably follow your example and whip one up for himself. Since you did the sorcery and you'll be wearing the clothes, you won't have to worry about them disappearing when you walk away."

"Or, if they do for some reason, at least you'll have some regular clothes on underneath." G added with a slow nod.

"Sounds good. If Lucky will let me borrow something of his to wear, then I can do the sorcery to make my clothes look like a uniform and then Lucky can mimic the spell for himself." Lex slowly reasoned.

"What are the chances that you'll go back to being full size and tear up Lucky's clothes?" Paul asked seriously.

"I'm gonna teach him the clothes changing spell so he won't have to worry about that." Lucky hurriedly announced.

"That's right. You've already done two complete transformations with that spell and your clothes weren't damaged at all." Paul acknowledged.

"Do you want to go ahead and do it so we can see that everything works the way we're expecting it to?" G asked reasonably.

"Are you sure you aren't too sleepy?" Paul asked with a mischievous grin.

"I was saying that I was too sleepy to waste time on guessing games." G said sternly, then added, "And I still am."

"Right." Paul confirmed, then turned and asked, "Lucky, do you have some clothes that Lex can borrow?"

"I don't know where Aunt Beth put my suitcases." Lucky cautiously admitted.

"Should we go check the guest room?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"I don't think she'd put him there. If anything, she'd expect him to stay out here with us. Let's check in the living room before we do anything else." G said slowly.

Paul gave a shrug, then led the procession out of G's bedroom.

* * * * *

"You called it." Paul said as he walked to the suitcases placed beside G's couch.

"It just proves that your mom really gets us. Not only can she predict what decisions we're going to have to face, but she also knows what we're going to decide." G said with a smile at the realization.

"Great. Just what every guy wants to hear." Paul said reluctantly.

"What kind of clothes do you want?" Lucky asked as he moved one of the suitcases to the seat of the couch and proceeded to open it.

"Just whatever you've got to spare, a shirt and some pants, I guess. If everything goes right, no one's going to see it anyway." Lex said uncertainly.

"What are you going to do about underwear, socks and shoes? What about a coat? It's cold out there." G asked with increasing concern.

"It sounded so simple, but Lucky's going to be doing good to have everything he needs. There's no way he should have to worry about completely outfitting me, too." Lex said darkly.

"I've got everything you need, but it's the wrong size." G said as a reminder.

"So you size up, get dressed, cast Lucky's clothes changing spell, then size down and cast your uniform illusion." Paul said thoughtfully, then looked around and asked, "Would that work?"

"I was kinda hoping we could... I mean, I have these shirts and I thought we could do like a 'brother' thing and dress the same." Lucky mumbled uncomfortably.

"We can still do that. I can borrow G's clothes, size down, then put on your shirt before we do our illusions. That way, underneath all the magic, we'll still look like brothers." Lex finished triumphantly.

"You know where the clothes are. Why don't you get what you need while I pick out an anime for us to watch while we're going to sleep?" G asked as he started walking toward the shelving beside the big screen TV.

"Okay. I'm going to get everything but a shirt." Lex said before hurrying away.

* * * * *

"I'm not being silly, am I?" Lucky asked quietly into the silence that followed.

"About what?" Paul asked curiously as he devoted his full attention to his younger cousin.

"Wanting for Lex and me to be the same. I mean, it's kinda stupid." Lucky reluctantly admitted.

"The things people want don't always make sense, but they still want them. The thing is, we don't mind doing a little something extra if it'll make you happy. If Lex wearing your shirt instead of G's will cause you to feel closer to Lex, then all of us are for it." Paul said honestly, then added more quietly, "You and Lex showed up here at the same time. If there's anyone who can help him to feel wanted, needed, and accepted, it's you."

"I wasn't trying to do that. I was just trying to make Lex into the brother that I always wanted." Lucky quietly admitted.

"That's no problem. There's no reason that you both can't get exactly what you want out of this situation." Paul said honestly.

* * * * *

"How does this look?" Lex asked as he walked into the room bare-chested, but otherwise dressed.

"Familiar." G said with a grin.

Lex puzzled over that for a moment, then slowly said, "I have to be this size until Lucky can show me the clothes changing spell."

"I know, but when you ask me 'how do I look?' and you look 'exactly' like me, what am I supposed to say?" G asked reasonably.

"Lucky? Are you ready to teach Lex the spell?" Paul gently asked.

"Yeah!" Lucky immediately responded, then just as suddenly asked Paul, "Will you watch me to be sure that I'm telling him how to do it right?"

"I'll watch, but with as good as your spell has been working, I'm pretty sure that you've mastered it." Paul said confidently.

"What do I do first?" Lex cautiously asked.

"You do it like this." Lucky said, then began to demonstrate a series of complicated gestures as he started speaking the words of the spell.

It was strange to Paul that, even though he already knew the spell, primarily because he was the one who had taught it to Lucky, somehow the spell suddenly seemed 'foreign' and nearly incomprehensible to him.

"Where did you learn a spell like that?" Lex asked with astonishment at the complexity of it.

"Paul taught it to me." Lucky said simply.

"Do you want to go ahead and try it?" Paul cautiously asked, honestly not knowing if Lex had been able to glean enough of the spell to be able to replicate it.

"I don't think I can." Lex said honestly.

"Maybe I didn't do it right. Can you show him?" Lucky asked Paul hopefully.

"Yeah. But later, when we have more time, I'd like to take a good look at your casting of that spell again. There's something different about it, but I'm not quite sure what it is." Paul said cautiously.

"Did Lucky not cast it right?" G asked hesitantly.

"I think he did. In fact, he may have cast it better than I did. It looks like he somehow instinctively broke down the spell and rebuilt it in terms that fit better with his own style of magic." Paul said uncertainly.

"So it won't work?" G hesitantly asked.

"It should work just fine for Lucky. But I'm really not sure if someone else could use it or not." Paul said honestly.

"Paul? Will you show me the spell?" Lex asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I'll go slow. Try to follow along with me as I do it." Paul said before preparing to teach one of the first spells he had ever learned.

"I know how to learn new spells. I've been doing it for years." Lex informed him with a teasing grin.

"Says the guy who's less than a week old." Paul retorted, then before Lex could respond, began going through the long version of the clothes changing spell.

When they were finished, Lex cautiously said, "That wasn't anything like the spell that Lucky was using."

"Actually, from the inside, the way it manipulates forces, it's exactly the same. But as far as the way he casts it, I'm with you. They're completely different." Paul said frankly.

"Let's see if it works." Lex said seriously, then added with a grin, "Going down."

With a few rushed gestures and a quick recitation of the words, Lex was easily able to replicate the spell to make himself look younger and otherwise alter his appearance.

"That answers the question if Lex can do basic magic. The clothes changing spell seems to be working just fine." Paul said as he watched Lex's casting of the spell critically.

"Then I guess it's time for the shirts." G added.

"You don't have to if you don't want to." Lucky said timidly.

"I think it's a great idea. Who knows? Maybe sometime tomorrow we'll have a chance to do some kind of a big sorcery 'reveal' and do some showing off. It'll be even better if we're dressed the same underneath. It'll look like we were planning for it." Lex said happily.

"Let's see if you can get the uniform to look right first." G said frankly.

Lex pulled the red t-shirt on over his head, then said, "Yeah. Let's find out."

"Are you going to need any diagrams or flames or anything?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. This is mostly about manifesting a predetermined illusionary construct. I don't need any diagrams and I think the flames would probably distract my visualization." Lex said honestly.

"Do you need some time to craft it before you give it a try?" G asked seriously.

"Would you?" Lex challenged.

"No. With all the practice I've had in class with crafting clothing, I think I could probably manage something like this off the top of my head." G said confidently.

"Let's see what I can do. Worst case scenario, I'll have to get an actual uniform out to use as a model." Lex said frankly.

"Go ahead." G encouraged.

"Do you want me to do it with you?" Lucky asked hesitantly.

"Let me try it on my own first and get the bugs worked out. If it goes well, then I can recast it with you." Lex said seriously.

Lucky accepted the answer and waited to see what Lex was going to do.

After a long silent moment, Lex began the definition phase of his spell, which was by far the most detailed and time consuming part of it. Basically, he was describing, in magical terms, every aspect of the uniform that he wanted to appear to be wearing. Not only did he have to convey the size, shape, color, and texture, but also the behavior of the uniform in reaction to his movements.

G watched and listened with interest and nodded a few times in agreement with the choices that Lex made.

At one point, Paul glanced down at Lucky and was surprised to see him enthralled in the spell casting, as though he understood every word of it, even though Paul himself didn't.

G motioned to gain Paul's attention, then gestured toward Lex, indicating that something was about to happen.

Between one second and the next, Lex was festooned in the finery that the students of the Arcadia Academy had come to look upon as normal.

"That looks great!" Lucky enthusiastically exclaimed.

After a moment more to examine Lex's handiwork, G finally said, "It really is excellent. I doubt that I could do better myself."

"And since G's the sorcerer that was chosen for the work study program, you know that he's the best." Paul said seriously, just in case anyone didn't get what a compliment that really was.

"What do you think, Lucky? Do you want to give it a try?" Lex asked curiously.

"Let me see if I can do it myself, first." Lucky said slowly, obviously not completely secure in his decision.

"Yeah. Go ahead. Show us what you can do." Lex finally said encouragingly.

Lucky started with a hand sign that Lex definitely had not used. He held it for a long moment as he seemed to collect his thoughts.

The others remained still and silent, so as not to distract Lucky from what he was attempting to do.

As Lucky began to cast his spell, Paul looked to G and Lex to see if they showed any signs of comprehending what Lucky was doing.

"That's not sorcery." G said quietly, in response to Paul's inquisitive look.

"It's not wizardry either." Paul said to confirm what his companions already knew.

"But what is it?" Lex finally asked.

"I think it's Lucky's interpretation of your spell. When you do it, one plus one equals two. When Lucky does it, seven plus negative five equals two. He gets the same answer, but he takes a different path to get there." Paul carefully explained.

"Except that G and I use one plus one apples while Lucky is using the arctangent of zebras times grapefruits. He's not just restating the spell, he's approaching it from a completely different framework. There is nothing here that I recognize." Lex fought to explain.

"Let's just make sure that Lucky gets every chance to learn what he can do with the ability he naturally has. Don't try to make him be like everyone else." Paul implored his brothers to understand.

"How's this?" Lucky asked as he turned to show off his school uniform.

"You three kinda make me wish I could do sorcery." Paul said frankly.

"Do you mean that with all your alchemy and plotters and stuff, that you can't make a uniform for yourself?" G asked teasingly.

"It looks great, Lucky. I'll let the two masters of sorcery critique it, but just looking at it as a regular person, I'd never know that it wasn't real." Paul said seriously.

"Paul's right. It looks good." G hurried to confirm, then continued more slowly, "But I'd still like to take a closer look at it, just to make sure that there isn't a seam showing or a blurry button that needs to be fixed before we say that it's completely done."

"Look at mine, while you're at it. I think it's pretty good, but since I'm wearing it I can't see it from every angle." Lex said seriously.

"Yeah. Just give me a minute." G said as he focused on the fine details of Lucky's uniform.

Paul made a gesture before reaching through a portal hanging in the air and putting his hand inside it, up to his elbow.

He kept watch on what the others were doing while he searched for the book that he wanted. Once he had it in hand, his attention was completely on the table of values in his textbook.

"What are you looking at?" Lucky asked curiously, when he noticed.

"I was just thinking that if I could plot the volume of a cylinder as a starting point, I could use alchemy to give it weight and my wizard's light tricks to get the colors right." Paul said thoughtfully.

"I was just joking." G said flatly.

"So was I." Paul said simply, then continued, "Now I'm not."

"Do you really think you can do it?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Let's find out." Paul said as he closed the textbook and put it back in his locker.

"Can I do it with you?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"I don't know how it's going to turn out, but you can follow along if you want to." Paul said casually.

"Just a second." Lucky said as he quickly dispelled the illusion that he had just created.

Paul waited a moment, and once he was sure that Lucky was prepared, he began to slowly and carefully go through his casting of the spell.

Although he didn't exaggerate his movements, he did make them purposefully and distinctly, so there was less of a possibility that Lucky would misinterpret what he was doing.

Likewise, he did the long-form spoken version of his improvised spell, carefully enunciating every word clearly and correctly so that Lucky could follow.

To his credit, Lucky maintained the cadence and precision of the spell he had never heard or seen before.

Lex and G watched intently, unable to decipher the majority of what Paul and Lucky were attempting to manifest.

After a certain point, a smile found its way onto Paul's face as his casting seemed to become more casual and easy going.

"Hey, that's the clothes changing spell!" Lex announced when he recognized it as a component part of Paul's greater spell.

"So you're doing the rough creation of the uniform by plotting intersecting cylinders, then deforming the cylinders using the clothes changing spell to conform it to your body." G slowly reasoned.

As G was saying the words, both Paul and Lucky were suddenly wearing something that looked very much like school uniforms.

"It's going to need some detail work, but it's actually better than I expected for a first try." Paul said honestly.

"Try this." Lucky said, then began a spell all his own.

Paul hurried to follow Lucky's lead, before the boy could get too far ahead of him in the spell casting.

"I can't even guess at what Lucky's trying to do." G said honestly.

"I've got an idea, but we'll have to wait till he's done to see if I'm right." Lex said slowly, carefully watching every move of what Paul and Lucky were doing.

"Do you think you could do Paul's spell?" G asked curiously.

"Not if he's using alchemy. I don't have any talent for that." Lex said frankly.

"I don't have a talent for alchemy. That doesn't necessarily mean that you don't either." G said seriously.

"I guess you're right. Even though I look like you, I'm not an identical copy. There's no reason that I couldn't have my own distinct magical abilities." Lex reluctantly agreed.

"How's that?" Lucky asked as soon as he finished his casting.

"I... I don't know what you just did." Paul said honestly.

"Whatever it is, it fixed all the janky parts of your uniform. It looks real now. I don't think I could tell it from a regular uniform." G said seriously.

Paul looked down at himself, then at Lucky and asked, "What did you just do?"

"I cast the illusion on top of the alchemy plotter spell." Lucky said simply.

"How... I'm not a sorcerer. I can't do illusions." Paul said disjointedly as he fought to understand what they had just done.

"It must be Lucky's reinterpretation of my spell." Lex said slowly, obviously uncertain if he was missing something in what he had witnessed.

"Do you think you could cast that spell again?" G asked curiously.

"I know that I couldn't. Not without Lucky guiding me through it." Paul said seriously.

"So you can't bring the spell up on one of your stone walls?" G cautiously asked.

"No. Not one word of it stuck in my head. It's like listening to someone speaking a completely foreign language. I can parrot along behind him, especially if he goes slow for me, but I can't remember words that I don't understand the meaning of." Paul said slowly.

"No matter how you look at it, Lex and Lucky both have adequate uniforms for tomorrow. Lex can use sorcery to create an illusion that should get him through just about anything." G said seriously.

"Yeah. And Lucky can use alchemy, sorcery or a combination of both to make his uniform." Paul said with a smile down at his younger cousin.

"Right. So is there any reason that we aren't watching anime and settling in for sleep right now? I feel like I'm about to die." G asked firmly.

"What do you think, guys? Are you both ready for tomorrow?" Paul asked curiously.

"I feel pretty good about the uniform. I can't say that I'm looking forward to Dr. Williams evaluating me." Lex said frankly.

"The evaluation isn't my fondest memory of my time at this school, but it wasn't too bad." Paul said honestly, then thought to add, "At least I can see the point of it. It's not some stupid thing you have to do for no reason. They really do need to know about your magic, your nature and your control before they start trying to teach you things."

"Besides, Dr. Williams already knows who and what you are. He's probably going to be one of the easiest people to talk to because you won't have to hide anything from him about your origin or explain things that you can't be honest about." G said frankly.

"What should I do about Corabeth?" Lex asked nervously.

"Tell her the truth." G said simply.

Paul nodded, then said, "She's totally into you. If you explain that you can't be you at school. That G's twin brother, who no one ever heard of before, can't just suddenly appear out of nowhere. I'm sure she'll understand. Corabeth's cool like that."

"You can still be yourself when it's just the two of you together." G said simply.

"And that gives you another reason to spend time alone with each other... I'm thinking that's probably a good thing." Paul finished with a grin.

"Does anyone have anything against vampire movies?" G asked as he looked at his selection of anime videos.

"Is it very gory?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. It's just a little creepy. It's actually the story of a vampire princess." G said happily.

"That should make for some interesting dreams." Paul chuckled as he settled into his usual place on the couch.

"Is it okay if Zah Zah watches it with us?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"Sure. Did you leave her in the bedroom?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. I undid her when I changed into a Pegasus." Lucky casually explained.

"Why don't you go ahead and take your shower and get ready for bed now? When you get back in here, you can summon Zah Zah to watch the video with you." G suggested.

"Do you want to go with me, Lex? It'll be faster if we go together." Lucky asked hopefully.

"Sure. I guess." Lex said uncertainly as he looked to Paul and G for guidance.

"If you're wanting to wear your red shirts tomorrow, be sure to hang them up straight so they won't be wrinkled." G cautioned them.

"Have fun." Paul added with a grin.

"Lex, are you going to need any pajamas before you go in?" G thought to ask.

"Maybe having an always clothed form wasn't so bad after all." Lex grumbled.

"If you think about it, that was part of you not being 'real'. Having to put up with bathing and choosing what to wear is worth it, isn't it?" Paul asked, obviously rhetorically.

"Or, I could sleep as a unicorn, then I wouldn't need to worry about showering or clothes at all." Lex said with a smile at the thought.

"Yeah, you could graze in the back yard and we could feed you carrots when we're done with school for the day. You wouldn't have a single care in the world." Paul said in a leading tone.

"Yeah... No. I really do want to be a person." Lex said decisively.

"You know where I keep everything. Take whatever you need." G said seriously, then thought to add, "If you get done before we do, we'll be using Paul's bathroom to get ready. Just relax in front of the TV and we'll start the video as soon as everyone's ready."

* * * * *

While Paul and G did have some fun in the shower, it wasn't anything too intense or too time consuming.

As they walked into the living room of G's suite, they found Lex, Lucky and Zah Zah sitting together in front of the television, fast asleep.

"Even asleep, Zah Zah looks creepy as hell." G said frankly.

"Yeah. Um... I don't think hell had anything to do with it. This one's all on Lucky." Paul said in hell's defense.

"How can something that's not alive even sleep?" G slowly asked.

"I'm pretty sure that no matter what answer we come up with for that, it's not going to make us sleep any better." Paul said honestly.

"Right. I'm definitely too tired to worry about it." G said as he placed a DVD in the player.

"Is your alarm set?" Paul thought to ask.

"Of course. But it probably wouldn't hurt if you set yours, too. Waking up in the morning might be a little rough." G said as he joined Paul on the couch.

"Yeah. And the Wudewas are a little fuzzy." Paul said before snuggling into G's shoulder.

Chapter 6

"When do we have to wake up?" Lucky whispered into the darkness.

G cracked open one eye, then looked at his phone before answering, "In about half an hour."

"Oh, okay." Lucky said quietly, then put his head back down and closed his eyes.

A long moment later, Lex whispered, "We can go outside until the guys get up, if you want to."

"It's probably cold out there. What is there to do this early in the morning?" Lucky asked uncertainly.

"Nothing. Maybe just horse around for a little bit." Lex said with a smile.

It took a moment for Lucky to catch on to what Lex was suggesting, but once he understood, he excitedly whispered, "Yeah! Let's go!"

Lex and Lucky fought to keep quiet as they prepared to go outside, although how well they did was up for debate.

* * * * *

As soon as they were out the door, where they could speak more freely, Lucky quickly asked, "Do you have your changey on?"

"My 'changey'?" Lex asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. Your clothes changing spell. You don't want to mess your clothes up, do you?" Lucky asked seriously.

"I never dispelled it last night, but I think it probably turned itself off when I went to sleep." Lex said slowly.

"Go ahead and do it so we can start 'horsing'. I'm cold." Lucky said urgently.

Lex silently went through the words of the spell while performing the hand signs.

At the same time, Lucky was going through his own version of the same spell.

As soon as Lex was done, he asked, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah!" Lucky said joyfully, then began his transformation.

Lex started only a moment behind him and soon resolved into a unicorn colt and came eye to eye with Lucky's Pegasus.

Verbal communication was somewhat limited between the two, but since they were both enjoying the freedom of being in their animal transformations, Lex indicated the direction that he wanted to go with a tilt of his head and Lucky broke into an immediate gallop, revelling in the joy of communing with nature on an untroubled morning. Lex followed immediately behind; in that moment, loving his life and everything in it.

* * * * *

"If you don't turn that thing off I'm going to summon demons to strike down upon it with great vengeance and furious anger." Paul ground out.

"How about you just help me find the stupid thing and turn it off? It must have fallen between the couch cushions." G said with obvious frustration.

"I thought you left it on the arm of the couch last night." Paul said as he came more awake, although he was still more of a hindrance than a help in the search effort.

"Yeah. It must have fallen when I checked the time for Lucky." G said shortly, then suddenly proclaimed, "Got it!"

A moment later there was blessed silence in the room.

Once Paul had recovered his wits from the abrupt wake up, he slowly looked around and cautiously asked, "Where are Lucky and Lex?"

"Outside... Being horses, I think." G said uncertainly.

"Oh..." Paul slowly responded, then cautiously asked, "Do you think we should go get them?"

"Let's go ahead and get ready for school and if they aren't back by breakfast time, we'll worry about it then." G said decisively.

"Right." Paul confirmed, not so much in agreement, as an unwillingness to invest more thought and energy into the project.

* * * * *

"Do you think they went to breakfast?" Lucky asked with concern as he led the way in through the front door.

"We were close enough to hear them if they called for us. I don't think they'd go to breakfast without at least 'trying' to let us know." Lex said as he followed.

"You guys had better get ready to go. You don't want to start the day on Mom's bad side, do you?" G called from his bedroom.

"Bathroom's free." Paul called a moment later.

"Do you think you'll be able to turn back to 'Cousin Lex' without too much trouble?" Lucky asked with concern.

"Yeah. But with all the back and forth that we went through, I may need some help remembering which clothes I have to put on at which stage of the process. It got kind of confusing there for a minute." Lex said honestly.

"I think I remember it all. I can help you if you want." Lucky quickly volunteered.

"Okay. But I need a quick rinse off in the shower first. All that running got me sweaty." Lex said frankly.

"Yeah. Let's hurry!" Lucky said as he urged Lex forward.

* * * * *

"How is everybody doing this morning?" D asked as all the boys walked into the dining room together.

"I think we're okay. But Lex is going to need some clothes." G said frankly.

"We can make things work for a while. It's not an emergency." Lex hurried to assure them.

"Well, I'm glad that you were able to find uniforms that fit... did G have some smaller uniforms in reserve that I didn't know about?" D asked uncertainly.

"No. These are illusions." G said simply.

"You're wearing illusionary clothing to school? Isn't that risky?" D asked hesitantly.

"Don't worry. They've got real clothes on underneath, they just did illusions to make them look like uniforms." G explained.

"See?" Lex said as he allowed the illusion to fall away for his red shirt to be seen.

"Oh, very nice. I can definitely see that being handy." D said in an impressed tone.

"But G is right. We're going to need to buy you new clothes this weekend... all of you." Beth said firmly as she looked around the table at all the boys.

"But we just bought me clothes." Paul automatically protested.

"It's been several months... nearly a year ago, come to think of it. I may not have mentioned it to you before, but the proper time to buy new clothes is *before* they start falling to rags around your feet." Beth said seriously.

"I think we're all due." G easily agreed.

"Suck up." Paul said with a grin at G, to take any sting out of the words.

"While we've got this chance, I wanted to be sure to remind you that until you can make it a habit, you need to be extra careful to be discreet at school." D said seriously.

"We hang around with Curtis every day. We know how to keep a lid on it." Paul assured him.

"We're not worried about that. What you need to watch out for is Lucky and Lex. Not every person you meet needs to know *where* Lex came from or *what* Lucky can do." Beth said frankly.

"Lucky and I are here from Virginia and we don't know *what* Lucky can do yet. We just know it's something more than baby magic. Part of what we're doing here is figuring it all out." Lex said confidently.

"I'll trust you boys to handle it. I just wanted to be sure that you had been warned. This is one of those things that can come back to bite you later if you don't take precautions from the beginning." Beth said honestly.

"Miss Oaken, she's one of the teachers, she told me that she doesn't tell people about her ability because some people will automatically judge what kind of person she is by the type of magic she uses." Lex said seriously, then explained, "If a *teacher* is careful about who she tells, then we shouldn't have to feel funny about it."

"Yes. I didn't mean for it to sound like you were some kind of oddity. I just didn't want for you to unthinkingly release information that might be used to harm you later." Beth assured him.

"Got it." Lex promised.

* * * * *

After a long quiet moment while the family enjoyed their food, Paul finally said, "Just so you know, Lucky was able to copy Lex's sorcery to make the illusionary uniform that he's wearing."

"And yesterday he was mimicking your wizardry." G reminded everyone, in case they hadn't caught the significance of it.

"He had no problem using his basic magic, either. His Zah Zah is mostly made from basic." Paul added.

"Except for the animation that Dad taught him... which he also used without a problem." G said seriously.

"Lucky appears to be a mimic. While it's not common, it's also not unheard of." D said frankly, then focused on Lex and Lucky as he continued, "Go and get evaluated and placed into classes. Once that's done, we'll look at how things turned out for you and make adjustments, if need be."

"I love how you break things down and make them seem so simple." Paul chuckled.

"Easy peasy." D said with a self-satisfied grin.

G and Lex broke into identical laughter at Paul's stunned look.

* * * * *

When breakfast was finished, D surprised the boys by announcing that he was going to drive them to school.

They were further surprised when Beth announced that she not only would be going with them, but also that she would be driving her own car. It seemed like a strange decision at first, but as Beth gathered up the car seat, loaded the diaper bag, the stroller, K's selection of favorite toys along with various and sundry other items essential for taking a baby on a car trip, the decision seemed more and more

reasonable, since there was no practical way to seat everyone comfortably in D's car along with all of K's gear.

D seemed to take it personally that he couldn't take his family on an impromptu drive. The look in D's eyes convinced Paul that a new vehicle was certain to be in their immediate future.

As soon as Beth had K settled in, everyone piled into the cars. Paul and Lucky automatically rode with D. Lex and G were only too happy to ride along with Beth and K.

* * * * *

Lex couldn't put into words what it meant to him that both Beth and D felt that getting him and Lucky enrolled was important enough that they made a point of going to the school to handle it in person.

"Mr. Darroch, it's so good to see you again. How did things end up going on the work study?" Janice asked pleasantly as the family entered the office.

"Our objectives were met." D said simply, then continued, "We're here to enroll Lex and Lucky."

"Yes. I believe that Mrs. Darroch was able to get most things arranged in advance for Lucky. We'll need for you to initial and sign a few things but it shouldn't take much more than that." Janice said happily as she set a stack of paperwork on the desk.

"I called last night to make arrangements for Lex. Do you know anything about that?" D asked seriously.

"Only that Marsha is taking care of it personally. She hasn't told me what's been done or what still needs to be done." Janice said frankly.

"Do you think we need to stick around in case Doctor Williams wants to evaluate us or anything?" G asked cautiously.

"I'm sure that he will want to evaluate you at some point, but he probably has a lot on his plate just now, having been away at the work study with us." D said seriously, then continued, "He knows where to find you when he's ready for you. I suggest that you attend to your normal business and keep in mind that he might be calling on you at some point later in the day."

"We'll be around if you need us." G said quietly to his former doppelganger.

"Yeah. I have a pretty good idea of where to find you." Lex assured him.

"Make sure to tell us all about what happened at lunch." Paul said to both Lucky and Lex.

After receiving affirmative nods from the pair, Paul and G hurried out of the office.

When D returned his attention to Janice, she nudged an ominous stack of paperwork in his direction.

* * * * *

"Mr. Darroch, I was just getting some details ironed out regarding the new addition... additions, to your family." Marsha said quickly as she entered the main room of the office.

"Thank you. I appreciate your extra effort on our behalf." D said calmly as he looked up from the paperwork that he had been perusing.

"And who is this little angel?" Marsha asked as she looked into the stroller.

"This is our daughter, K." D said proudly, then thought to add, "We won't be enrolling her just yet."

"It'll happen before you know it." Marsha said wistfully, then turned her attention to the young teenage boys and smiled as she said, "It's nice to see you again Lucky. I see that you've grown."

"Yeah. I do that sometimes." Lucky said uncomfortably.

"And I suppose, by process of elimination, this young man would be Lex."

"Yes Ma'am." Lex timidly confirmed.

You're aware that their ages might be an obstacle to their fitting in with the student population, aren't you?" Marsha slowly asked with a glance at D.

"Yes. But sometimes you have to accept that there's no right answer. Do we cast the boys adrift to discover their abilities on their own in a more typical environment, or do we put them with more advanced students that they might not be able to keep up with intellectually or emotionally?" D rhetorically asked.

"I see that you *are* aware." Marsha said simply, then continued, "We'll all keep an eye on things and do our best to help both boys deal with the stigma of being among the youngest students at the school."

"Lex can be older, if you need him to be." Lucky quietly offered.

"How's that?" Marsha asked with interest.

"Do you want me to show you here?" Lex asked as he looked around the office uncertainly.

"It's probably best if you don't. Just to be on the safe side." Marsha admitted.

"I can look any age I want." Lex explained, then thought to add, "I'm this size because I didn't want for Lucky to have to face everything new, all alone."

"That's very considerate of you." Marsha said appreciatively.

"It's what brothers do." Lex said simply.

"Even though they're not *technically* brothers, they came to us at the same time and both carry the family name, so I see no reason not to treat them as such." D said seriously.

"Since Lex is demonstrating his brotherhood in such a positive way, I can't see any reason to dissuade them either." Marsha agreed.

"So, what do we need to do to get both boys enrolled?" D asked, always ready to cut directly to an answer when possible.

"We have a few things to resolve in regard to Lex, the governmental things, that we'll need to go over, but I think the next thing on the agenda should be for the boys to visit with Doctor Williams so that he can get on with his evaluation." Marsha said thoughtfully.

"Just so you know, I have all of G's memories. So even though I'm technically a new student, I already know who people are, where everything is, and what to expect." Lex said frankly.

"Very good. Then if you'll go to Doctor Williams' office, we'll carry on with this and I'll see you again once he's finished with you." Marsha said cheerfully.

"C'mon, Lucky." Lex gently encouraged.

On impulse, Lucky ran to Beth and gave her a firm hug, then did the same to D before joining Lex at the door.

"We'll be right here if you need us." D assured them before the pair of boys stepped out into the hallway.

* * * * *

"Hello?" Lex asked uncertainly from just inside the office door.

"Yes, can I help you?" The man asked professionally.

"We're supposed to get Doctor Williams to evaluate us. Is he here?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Is one of you Lexington?" The man asked curiously.

"Yes. I am." Lex admitted, then asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm Doctor Coker. I watched over things here while Jevaun was away doing his work study project. He told me that you'd be stopping by and I was hoping that I could sit in on your evaluation."

"Why?" Lex asked slowly, appearing to be spooked by the unknown man's interest in him.

"According to what I was told, you're a newly created being who was accidentally given sentience. If that's the case, then I'd like to observe how you're dealing with things so that maybe I can use what I learn here to help others like you that I encounter in the future." Doctor Coker explained.

Lex thought about that for a moment, then hesitantly said, "Well, if it'll help other people like me, then I guess it's alright."

"Did the doctor tell you about me, too?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I don't think so. What was your name?" Doctor Coker asked curiously.

"Lucky Darroch."

"Jevaun probably knows about you, but he hasn't shared anything with me." Doctor Coker said honestly.

"Since they already know about me, we'll let you be a surprise." Lex said with a smile.

"Is he another sylphid?" Doctor Coker asked curiously.

"No. It's nothing like that. He just got sent here because, even though he's young, he's developing his 'big' magic a little bit ahead of most of his class. His old school wanted to keep him from learning how to use his magic until the other kids caught up to him." Lex said with a note of bitterness under his words.

"Moving at the pace of the slowest member of the class? Yes. I'm familiar with the practice." Doctor Coker admitted.

"Good. Because that's the whole reason that Lucky's here, so that he can be encouraged to grow and try new things and figure out all of what he can do with his abilities." Lex said passionately.

"Mervyn, it looks like you're off the hook. Michael said that he would take the job." Doctor Williams happily announced as he walked into the outer office with a younger man at his side.

"That's a relief." Doctor Coker said with a smile, then explained, "Although I'm sure it's going to be a valuable learning experience, I believe that I have had enough of those for the time being. It's time to give someone else a chance."

"I'm just afraid that I'm getting myself into something that I may not be prepared for." Michael said honestly.

"You are." Doctor Williams said frankly, then explained, "You're not prepared because you *can't* prepare for something like this. There's not *one* right answer. There may not be any. Go. Make contact. Talk to people, then decide what needs to be done next. You'll have our support for whatever you decide to do."

"Can I call you if I have questions?" Michael asked cautiously.

"Not easily." Doctor Williams said seriously, then explained, "Where you're going, they don't have phones, not even cellphones."

"Are you talking about Brynnhollow?" Lex asked curiously.

"You know about it?" Michael asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I just got back from there." Lex finished with a smile.

"Lexington? Is that you?" Doctor Williams asked delightedly.

"Yeah. I changed myself to make it easier on everyone. We figured that it'd cause G a lot of trouble to have an identical twin running around here all of a sudden." Lex timidly admitted.

"And who is this with you?" Doctor Williams asked, as he turned his attention to Lex's companion.

"This is Lucky Darroch, Paul and G's cousin from Virginia. His old school wouldn't teach him how to use his magic, so his mom sent him here." Lex explained.

"Michael, why don't you go take over for Indra? I'm going to need her in here to help with the evaluations. Later this morning you'll be meeting with someone... these boys' father, unless I miss my guess. We'll finalize your arrangements at that time so that you can be on your way to Kentucky."

"Yes, Doctor." Michael said before hurrying out of the room.

"Boys, will either of you object if Doctor Coker observes the examination?" Doctor Williams asked cautiously.

The boys looked at each other, then at Doctor Williams as they shook their heads in unison.

"Come along then."

* * * * *

"First things first, I suppose." Doctor Williams slowly said in prelude, then continued, "If you aren't already, could you change into your waking forms?"

"What's that?" Lucky asked anxiously.

"Just how you are when you first wake up in the morning, before you've done any magic to change how you look." Lex explained as he grew, aged and became identical to G.

"Oh. So I just stay like this?" Lucky asked to be sure.

"That's right. You're perfect just the way you are. You don't have to change a thing." Lex assured him.

"Yes. Very good. Your form seems to be nice and stable." Doctor Williams said with approval, then thought to ask, "Have you had any difficulty holding this form?"

"No. Even when I change myself into something else, I bounce right back to this." Lex said easily.

"Very good. That's just how it should be." Doctor Williams said as he made a note, then looked to Lucky and asked, "Tell me, Lucky, were you having some 'magical' problems at your last school?"

"I just asked a few people if they knew any magic stuff that I didn't already know. When the teachers found out, I got in trouble and they called my mom to come and get me." Lucky shyly admitted.

"Were you talking to non-witches about witchcraft?" Doctor Williams asked with concern.

"No! I was really careful about that! Everyone I talked to was witches and I think all of them had their little magic already. The teachers didn't want for us to talk about it or use any magic at all. They'd just 'tell us' about magic that we'd be allowed to use 'someday'." Lucky explained.

"I can see how that could be frustrating." Doctor Coker said sympathetically.

"After I visited with Paul and G and they showed me how to use my own magic, going to that school and being told all the time that I couldn't do something that I know I can do made me... want to show people... to make them understand... to prove that I wasn't lying to them." Lucky struggled to explain.

"Mrs. Bright was kind enough to send me a copy of your school records. According to this, your old school told your mother that either you would have to be cursed to block your ability to use magic at all, or you couldn't return to their school." Doctor Williams said frankly.

"I didn't know anything about that. I just knew that I was in trouble." Lucky said honestly.

"You didn't do anything wrong." Lex quietly assured him.

"Yes. Your old school has some very backward policies. You're better off being far away from that place." Doctor Williams confirmed.

"Now you can learn all kinds of good stuff." Lex added with an encouraging smile.

"Quite right! Let us move on to more enjoyable topics." Doctor Williams said happily, then asked, "Do either of you know if you already have a 'fighting form'?"

"Yeah!" Lex happily acknowledged, then turned to Lucky and asked, "Do you have your changey on?"

"I got it!" Lucky eagerly responded.

"Then let's do it!" Lex proclaimed as his animal transformation began.

As Doctor Williams and Doctor Coker watched, Lex and Lucky simultaneously began the transformation from their human forms to those of early adolescent horses.

"Just so you know, most kids your age don't even know what I'm talking about when I ask them about their fighting form." Doctor Williams said honestly.

"Didn't you say that Lexington was an air elemental?" Doctor Coker asked slowly.

"Yes. That's right." Doctor Williams confirmed.

"That being the case, I would expect him to have something more along the lines of a zephyr as a fighting form." Doctor Coker said honestly.

"I believe something like that would be more likely for an elemental created without ties to other beings. Given no other influences, the elemental probably *would* gravitate toward a grand manifestation of their element.

"But you don't have to look any further than Lucky to see what influence Lexington has had in his development and decisions." Doctor Williams said seriously.

Lex, in his unicorn form, turned himself half around, then in one fluid movement continued on as he transformed directly into his 'Cousin Lex' form.

"I was told that I had to choose a fighting form because not having one could cause me some serious trouble later on." Lex said in his own defense, then hurried to add, "But I *did* pick a unicorn mostly because of Lucky."

"I'm glad that you were able to receive that warning. I can envision a circumstance where, in the heat of the moment, an elemental might adopt a form that was counter to his long term best interest." Doctor Williams said seriously.

"But I don't see how a unicorn will utilize the magic of elemental air." Doctor Coker said honestly.

"It's actually a wise choice. Unicorns are from the nature realms, so they are automatically hardwired for the primary elements. In regard to air, I believe they have significant concussive blast attacks as well as the standard wind manipulations, utilizing the horn much like a wizard would wield a wand." Doctor Williams explained.

"I didn't think of that." Lex said in surprise, then quickly added, "If I needed to, I could change into a unicorn and have access to more air magic than just about anyone... except maybe G. He held the Mikael Spear. I'm betting he can channel air magic at a master level now."

"You may be right about that. We'll be checking on that later. But before we can go too far off topic, perhaps Lucky could change back so that we can continue the examination."

Lucky did much as Lex had done, just as Ginh Zah and Mah Zah had taught him. He turned in a tight circle and in completing one revolution, he raised his head and stood up straight, looking entirely human.

"Very well done." Doctor William said with true appreciation.

"Yes, quite." Doctor Coker confirmed, then explained, "I have seen students several years your senior struggle with the transition from their animal forms. You make it look nearly effortless."

"We had good teachers." Lex said shyly.

Lucky quickly nodded his agreement.

"Come into the other room so that we can begin the examination proper." Doctor Williams said as he led the way.

The others followed without hesitation. All of them appeared to be equally interested in the results of the testing.

* * * * *

"Who wants to be first?" Doctor Williams asked as he gestured to the elevated bed.

"Lucky, why don't you go? They already know who and what I am, so all they have left to figure out is how powerful I am. We still don't even know for sure what your magical specialty really is." Lex said honestly.

"What do you want me to do?" Lucky asked anxiously.

"Just sit up here where I can have a look at you." Doctor Williams said easily as he patted the spot on the bed beside where he was standing.

"Oh, okay." Lucky said and stepped up on the conveniently placed stool then hopped up onto the edge of the bed.

"Let us see..." Doctor Williams trailed off as he looked through the multi-colored magnifying glass on a swing arm.

* * * * *

There was a long moment of silence before Doctor Coker finally said, "We seem to have a few lingering questions here. A bit of exposition on your part might serve to dislodge them."

"Look at this." Doctor Williams said with delight, then shifted the magnifying glass so that Doctor Coker could look through it.

"Are you not going to tell us?" Lex asked cautiously.

"I will in a moment. Just now, I'm asking for a second opinion." Doctor Williams said as he stood aside and waited for Doctor Coker's analysis.

"He's a child of the sun." Doctor Coker said in astonishment.

"It would appear so." Doctor Williams confirmed.

"I've never heard of that. What does that mean?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Lexington, you remember the zodiac spell we enacted during the work study, don't you?" Doctor Williams asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah. I remember that." Lex confirmed.

"Lucky's magic is sourced outside of it." Doctor Williams said carefully.

"Instead of telling me what it's not, could you tell me what it is?" Lex asked seriously, worried on his newest brother's behalf.

"Sun, moon, and star elementals have access to an entirely different magical paradigm. Where you, Lexington, have a solid foundation in air, Lucky may very well be able to manipulate air in ways that even you can't." Doctor Williams said frankly.

"That's not to say that he doesn't have limitations." Doctor Coker hurried to add.

"Correct. His capabilities are just... not what one might expect." Doctor Williams said with difficulty.

"His magic follows a different set of rules." Doctor Coker quickly added, hoping that it would provide some sort of enlightenment.

"From what Paul and G were able to figure out last night, they pretty much decided that Lucky is a magic mimic. I don't really know anything about what that means except that it seems like Lucky can copy just about anybody's magic and use it just like it's his own." Lex said seriously.

"I suppose that's one possible manifestation of a sun elemental's ability. Actually, according to the lore, they're incredibly versatile... at least, at this early stage of things." Doctor Williams reluctantly finished as he looked to Doctor Coker for support.

"The more you use your magic, the more you 'train' it. At this point it might seem like you can do anything." Doctor Coker cautiously explained.

"You're talking like something bad is going to happen to Lucky because of what he is." Lex said anxiously.

"Not necessarily. At least, not if we're vigilant." Doctor Williams was quick to assure them.

"Can you just tell us?" Lex asked hopefully.

"The legends state that the sun elemental exists to explore the world to find a problem that needs to be solved. Over time, the sun elemental doesn't solve the problem. He himself becomes the solution." Doctor Williams carefully explained.

"What does that mean?" Lex asked firmly.

"Children of the sun can combine styles or types of magic that usually aren't compatible and make them work together to accomplish a specific task. According to legend, over time, they tend to become less and less flexible, but at the same time more and more powerful in a few select types of magic. It's possible that when it's all said and done, the sun elemental could be the only person in the WORLD who could use a particular magical manifestation." Doctor Williams implored them to understand.

"So Lucky can do *any* type of magic?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Theoretically, yes. Practically, no." Doctor Coker slowly answered, then explained, "If you're correct about his mimicry, then he will likely have the limitation that he must witness a magic being used to have access to it. That limit might also have the benefit that whatever magic he uses will be mastered quickly and efficiently, following the example of the original caster. There won't be nearly as much wasted time and effort as there might be otherwise."

"What do you think about that, Lucky?" Lex cautiously asked.

"How long do I have before I have to pick something?" Lucky asked anxiously.

"Assuming that all is as it appears, I imagine that your magical talents will start to narrow a few years from now, probably not before you graduate high school." Doctor Williams said speculatively.

"So he doesn't have to decide today?" Lex asked, just to be sure that Lucky clearly understood that one point.

"No. In fact, the *last* thing we want is for Lucky to decide *anything* before he's had a chance to explore the world. Before you can become the solution, you have to be aware of the problems." Doctor Williams said passionately.

"What kind of classes do sun elementals have to take?" Lex slowly asked.

"I'm not the one to make those decisions. But what I *can* tell you is that while mimics aren't all that common, sun elementals are *extremely* rare. There likely isn't a course of study laid out for them. In fact, given their need to experience so many varied things, I think the *last* thing we would want is to restrict their exploration of the magical world around them." Doctor Williams said seriously.

"So Lucky's going to have to study *all* the magic?" Lex asked uncertainly.

"I'm sure that forcing him to do that would be just as problematic as not teaching him at all." Doctor Williams said honestly.

"Perhaps with a gentle guiding hand, Lucky can be encouraged to investigate the types of magic that interest him most." Doctor Coker suggested.

A knock on the door interrupted their speculation.

"That will be Indra. Lexington, why don't you test with Doctor Coker while Indra begins the testing regime with Lucky? I need to talk with Mrs. Bright for a bit before she receives the test results." Doctor Williams asked before hurrying away.

Chapter 7

Doctor Coker took Lex through a reasonably intensive psychological exam, asking him dozens of thought provoking questions to gauge his beliefs regarding right and wrong, life and death and various other topics people often find compelling.

While Lex didn't have any grand emotional revelations during the exam, he *did* find some small measure of relief in the fact that he took the test just like anyone else. It made him feel just a little bit more secure in his 'personhood' to know that he had reactions and understanding of the test on par with a 'natural born' person.

Lex and Doctor Coker were in the outer office, so they saw it when Indra and Lucky walked from the examination room to Doctor Williams' inner office.

Doctor Coker set the psychological exam papers aside and said, "It's our turn for the evaluation."

"I've done all this before, back when I was part of G." Lex cautioned him.

"As long as you're sincere in your efforts, I believe that prior knowledge or previous results shouldn't have any impact on your test results today." Doctor Coker said seriously.

"Do you really believe that?" Lex asked curiously.

"I do." Doctor Coker confirmed, then added, "But there's only one way to find out for sure."

"Yeah. Okay." Lex said, then followed Doctor Coker into the examination room.

* * * * *

Lex had actually forgotten the breadth of the testing new students endured.

Most of the tests seemed to be pointless or they revealed such innocuous data that they hardly seemed worth the bother.

"Here's one that you might not have done before. Can you blow up this balloon for me?" Doctor Coker asked as he held out a flat red balloon.

"Inflate or explode?" Lex asked with a grin.

"We'll start with inflation and see where that takes us." Doctor Coker said with a smile, obviously appreciating Lex's attempt at humor.

"Do you want me to just blow it up the mundane way, or did you have some kind of a spell in mind?" Lex asked cautiously.

"I thought that since your specialty was air, that I'd let you decide how you wanted to do it." Doctor Coker said frankly.

"*Hemi, demi, swirley, semi, draw and grow, twirl and dance.*" Lex said poetically as he made a few simple hand gestures.

Doctor Coker watched with interest as the balloon began to spin and writhe as it expanded and filled with air.

"A bit simplistic, but you seem to have gotten the job done." Doctor Coker said, appearing to be mildly impressed with Lex's choice.

"I could conjure a tornado inside there if I wanted to, but that wouldn't really be useful for anything." Lex said honestly.

"I suppose that could be another data point for this test, knowing how to use a spell appropriate to the task at hand." Doctor Coker said speculatively.

"The balloon's full. Did you want me to do something with it?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Yes. Tie it off, then I'd like to see what level of control you have with it." Doctor Coker said seriously.

Lex tied the balloon, then waited.

"Can you move the balloon to the four corners of the room?" Doctor Coker asked curiously.

"Yeah." Lex said, then demonstrated by causing the balloon to move to each of the corners, using neither words nor gestures to enact his spell.

"Very good. You have excellent control." Doctor Coker said as he made a note on his clipboard.

"We can go through all the basic level air manipulations if you want, but I promise that I can do them all. In fact, I can probably do some that you haven't seen before." Lex said seriously.

"Really? Did you have something in mind?" Doctor Coker asked with interest.

In response, Lex held out his hand as the balloon floated directly to it.

As soon as the balloon was in place, Lex turned his hand and the balloon changed from red to yellow. With another twist of the wrist, it became green.

"If you're doing that with air, then I imagine that you're performing micro-manipulations to refract the color gradient." Doctor Coker said speculatively.

Lex gave the gentlest of pushes to launch the balloon from his palm, then made a slight gesture and the balloon suddenly became a bunch of green balloons.

"Reflection *and* refraction? That's a rather high level magic for someone your age." Doctor Coker remarked, now sounding fully impressed.

"I only *look* this age. In one way of thinking about it, I'm actually only a few days old, but another part of me is fifteen years old, or at least that's how it feels to me." Lex said honestly.

"Perhaps, but to be able to perform refractory air manipulations is a high level achievement, even for a fifteen year old." Doctor Coker said frankly.

"Well, to be honest, it helps that the balloon is a uniform shape and as small as it is." Lex cautiously admitted.

"Still, this is a good indicator of where you are in your development. You're certainly farther along than I would expect just by looking at you."

"I'm this size because I choose to be. If it's at all possible, I want to be kept with Lucky. Even if I have to take a few of the lower level classes, it will be worth it to make sure that he doesn't have to face this all by himself."

"I would help you if I could, but that's not my decision to make. If you'll be sure to mention it to Mrs. Bright, she might take your wishes into account. She strikes me as being a reasonable type." Doctor Coker said consideringly.

"Is that it for the magic test?" Lex asked cautiously.

"I think so. I'm satisfied that I have a reasonable idea of your developmental level. But if you have any other tricks to show me, we have a few minutes. I wouldn't mind a magic show." Doctor Coker finished with a smile.

Lex slyly grinned in response, then brought up his other hand and began to descriptively sign his spell.

Before Doctor Coker could ask what he was doing, another dozen balloons were present, and now all the previous colors were represented.

* * * * *

"Your test looks like it's a lot more fun than mine." Lucky cheerfully commented as he exited the examination room with Indra.

"Doctor Coker wanted a magic show." Lex said dismissively as he dispelled the balloons with a casual wave.

"How did your test go?" Lucky asked as he automatically moved to Lex's side.

"Everything went fine. How was yours?" Lex asked curiously as he gave Lucky a quick casual hug.

"I think I did okay. At least Indra didn't say I was wrong or stupid or anything." Lucky said frankly.

"Lucky has done reasonably well overall, but his *use* of magic is exceptional for someone his age." Indra said professionally, then added more gently, "Considering his potential, I think he's found himself in the right place."

"I showed her Zah Zah." Lucky timidly admitted.

"And she didn't run away screaming? Way to go, Indra! You're tougher than I thought." Lex said in an impressed voice.

"It's just an illusionary cat." Indra said hesitantly.

"I used G's smoothy sorcery on Zah Zah like what I did on Paul's uniform spell." Lucky explained.

"Oh. I can't even guess how that would look." Lex said honestly.

Lucky made six distinct hand signs while concentrating on the words of his spell.

In the blink of an eye, a tiny white kitten appeared, with a black spot circling its right eye.

"Oh! Isn't that adorable!" Doctor Coker chuckled with delight as he leaned in to get a better look.

"Stay back! Don't get too close! She'll rip your face off!" Lucky warned as he grabbed firm hold of Zah Zah to hold her back.

The silky, baby kitten fur that Lucky was holding sloughed off the tiny kitten beast, revealing the inky jagged nightmare hidden inside.

"Zah Zah! No!" Lucky said firmly as he kept firm hold on the empty tube of white fur, which was still attached to the hindquarters of the jagged horror.

Indra gave a small yelp of surprise and Lex reflexively took a step back in shock.

The scribbled beast turned it's 'too human' eyes on Lucky, as if measuring his sincerity.

"If you won't do as I say, I won't be able to let you out around people." Lucky firmly explained.

Zah Zah appeared to be thinking about it, then loosed a loud, abrasive 'meow', sounding like an audible manifestation of frustration and impatience.

"I'll let you out to prowl when we get home, while we're horsing around." Lucky promised.

Zah Zah appeared to consider a moment longer, then her scribbled irregular form retreated into the furry husk that Lucky was still holding.

"How did you get Zah Zah to do that?" Lex asked warily as he watched Lucky cuddle the nightmarish little monster close to his chest.

"I took the spell that Uncle D gave me and did like Paul said and made it do new stuff that it didn't do before. I stretched some things and twisted others so that the spell isn't all smooth and the same now." Lucky explained.

"I don't know if Zah Zah is alive or not, but she sure is acting a lot more like a living being." Lex said honestly.

"I don't know either, but Zah Zah isn't like she used to be. I change her a little bit every time I cast her to keep making her better and better... except, I still haven't figured out how to make her nice yet." Lucky reluctantly admitted.

"Do you think that she'd protect you if someone tried to do you harm?" Doctor Coker cautiously asked.

"Maybe... I mean, she probably *would* attack them... and it might even be on purpose. I really don't know for sure." Lucky said uncertainly.

"Something like this doesn't fall into any of the magical specialties that I can think of." Doctor Coker said as he looked at Indra with question.

"Maybe some of the nature specialties; when they create a golem, they imbue it with a spark of sentience that will sometimes grow into full-blown intelligence. I don't really know enough about that to say if it would relate to this instance." Indra said consideringly.

"I suppose an elemental, like Lex, might have something in common with a creation like this. Perhaps an examination of the spell used to create him might yield some answers." Doctor Coker suggested.

"That'd be fine except that we don't know *exactly* how I was made. G created a self-portrait illusion and somehow while he was holding a relic of elemental air, he made me become a completely separate being from him." Lex said frankly.

"So he didn't intentionally cast the spell that created you?" Doctor Coker asked to confirm.

"I don't know what he did. My memories are a little blurry about that. I remember being G, creating the illusion to help the spellcasters... Then I was me, helping the spellcasters while G was directing the elemental air. I'm not really sure about what happened in between." Lex said distantly.

"And you say that this G person, Gwayne, was holding an ancient relic at the time he created you?" Doctor Coker asked to confirm.

"Yeah. The Mikael Spear. He needed to be in two places at once so he found a way so that he *could* be." Lex said frankly.

"If that's the case, I still don't see how you're here with us, by all appearances a perfectly normal witch. At the very least I would think that you would be a force of nature; wild and nearly impossible to constrain." Doctor Coker said thoughtfully.

"I was thinking the same thing." Indra confirmed professionally.

"The only other thing I can think of to account for it is G's family history. His dad, D, can animate things like furniture and mannequins to do whatever he wants. He can command an army of them; he's really powerful. G's grandfather, Grandpa J, has

the ability to animate statues and other things that are in a generally human shape. I think I remember hearing that he can even give them a little spark of himself to make them able to follow simple instructions and react to things without him having to control them like puppets." Lex said distantly, struggling to remember conversations from G's distant past.

"So the confluence of G's heritage, him holding an ancient relic AND wishing he could be in two places at once seems to have resulted in your creation." Doctor Coker summarized.

An uncomfortable movement from Lucky drew Doctor Coker's attention, but it was Indra who asked, "Did you have another explanation, Lucky?"

"No. But I saw Lex before he was finished, when G was still working on him. I don't know what happened with that spear thing, but I know for sure that this Lex is the same person that G was working on back then. Whatever G did to make Lex be who he is, was already started back when I was here before." Lucky said with certainty.

"If that's true, then maybe something in G's ability that he inherited makes it so that *whatever* he creates has the potential to become 'real'. I just happened to be the illusion that he brought up while he was holding the Mikael Spear, and that pushed me over the threshold into being a person." Lex said speculatively.

"If I'm not mistaken, Jevaun is planning to examine Gwayne Darroch this afternoon. I was planning on attending anyway, but now I'll be sure to be there to mention your speculations. It sounds like something that should be investigated." Doctor Coker said seriously.

"Lucky, when you were first making Zah Zah, do you remember if you were trying to copy anything that G was doing while he was making me?" Lex asked hesitantly.

Lucky thought for a long moment, then slowly said, "I don't *remember* copying G, but I don't know for sure that I didn't. I wanted for Zah Zah to be real so bad that I might have seen something that he did and did it too."

"Since he didn't know about his mimicry back then, he wouldn't have been on the lookout for it. He might not have consciously recognized what he was doing anyway." Lex speculatively explained to Indra and Doctor Coker.

"So, what you're saying is that it's possible that Zah Zah could have a spark of sentience or free will, that she might actually be... alive?" Indra cautiously asked.

"I suppose that might depend on how you define 'alive'." Doctor Coker said honestly.

"Just let me know how you're defining it before we go too far. Remember, whatever definition you use for Zah Zah, you'll probably have to use for me, too." Lex said frankly.

"So far as I know, we've completed all the assigned testing. But I'd like to wait for Jevaun to return before sending you back to the administration office." Doctor Coker said consideringly.

"I can think of one thing that we could do, if you haven't already." Indra quietly offered.

"What would that be?" Doctor Coker asked with interest.

"I saw the notes about their fighting forms. Maybe, since they both have full animal transformations, we could help them stabilize their half-transformation forms." Indra cautiously suggested.

After a moment, Lucky quietly admitted, "I don't know what that is."

"For animal type shape-shifters, there's a place between human-looking and full animal where they can still talk, but also have access to their animal-form level of strength and magic." Lex carefully explained.

"Very well said, Lexington. I believe that Indra is quite right. Since you're both so competent in your animal forms, the next logical step would be to at least introduce you to your half forms. Much like your animal forms, they're something that you can practice with and eventually master over time." Doctor Coker explained.

"Do you want us to do it right now?" Lex asked cautiously.

"We appear to have the time. If you manifest somewhere between human and horse, as one might expect, we should have enough room in here to accomodate you."

"Okay. What do we have to do?" Lex asked decisively.

"The easiest way that I know of is to change fully into your animal form, then begin to change back, as slowly as you are able. As you change, try to speak in your human voice. As soon as you're able to do it, stop the change and try to hold it there. The half-form that you achieve can be the best of both worlds, higher

reasoning and the ability to communicate combined with primal strength and peak magic." Doctor Coker explained.

"Do you want me to go first?" Lex asked Lucky cautiously.

"Let's go together." Lucky said with resolve.

"Have you got your changey on?" Lex asked with a grin.

Lucky gave a single decisive nod then, as though it had been choreographed, the two boys began to turn in unison.

* * * * *

The transitions from teenager to horse were flawless. Even a practiced shape-shifter would be hard pressed to outdo their performances.

Once the boys had found their pure animal forms, the unicorn Lex nodded in the Pegasus Lucky's direction, then began the transition back.

As Doctor Coker had instructed, the boys transformed more slowly this time, and made quite a bit more noise. They were obviously both attempting to speak, but achieving only their natural animal speech.

"I don't know if I can." Lucky finally said with some strain in his voice.

"Just hold it right there. Don't change yourself more in either direction." Doctor Coker quickly instructed.

"I don't know..." Lucky said anxiously.

"Don't try to change up or down, but see if you can get more comfortable right where you are. Let your body stop where it is and fill out." Indra said urgently.

The horsehair creature began to take on a shape and develop differentiated body parts.

"That's it, Lucky. You're doing fine." Doctor Coker said supportively.

"Go ahead Lex. You've got this." Indra quickly encouraged.

Doctor Coker looked over and noticed that Lex was only one step behind Lucky in his transformation.

"Indra's right. You're right where you need to be. All that's left is to settle in." Doctor Coker said in a leading tone, trying not to be too jarring or distracting.

"That was tougher than I thought it'd be." Lex finally said.

"Is this how we're supposed to look?" Lucky asked reluctantly as he looked down at himself, then over at Lex.

"When it comes to your transitional forms, you mostly get what you get. In your case, it looks like you both got centaurs... That's not so bad. You could have easily gotten something more along the lines of a minotaur." Doctor Coker finished with a smile.

"Okay. I'm not mad or anything. I just wasn't sure if this is what we were trying to do." Lucky said honestly.

"There's someone I met back in Brynnhollow who can be a centaur, his name is Jim. I don't know him that well, but maybe next time we're there, we could visit him and he could teach us some centaur stuff." Lex said happily as he looked over his and Lucky's transformations.

"Is it comfortable? Are you having any trouble holding your forms?" Doctor Coker asked curiously.

"It's fine for me. This is as stable as any form that I've held." Lex said frankly.

"How about you, Lucky? Are you having any trouble holding this form?"

"No. This is easy... except for having four legs plus two arms.... that's kinda weird." Lucky said honestly as he thought about what he was feeling.

"Since you've adopted 'tried and true' conventional forms, I have no doubt that everything will fall into place fairly easily for you. If you had ended up in a form that we couldn't recognize, then I'd be a little more concerned about its ultimate functionality." Doctor Coker said frankly.

"What do we have here?" Doctor Williams asked as he walked into the office.

"We finished a little ahead of schedule, so Indra suggested that we could give the boys a head start on refining their half-forms." Doctor Coker said seriously.

"I don't know that I've seen a winged centaur or a unicorn centaur in person before, although I'm certain that I've seen depictions of both in the mythology library." Doctor Williams said with a smile.

"I kinda chose to be like Lucky. After that, one thing led to another. Now I'm this." Lex explained disjointedly.

"However it happened, I will consider it a very good sign. You've attained stable, functional forms that can be used in both magical and physical combat situations." Doctor Williams said seriously.

Lex tentatively touched the point of the four-inch long slender horn that protruded from the middle of his forehead.

"Imagine holding a wand of incredible power with both hands and wielding it with all your might." Doctor Williams said slowly, then explained, "That is what I've been told that it feels like to wield the unicorn's power."

"I didn't think I'd have anything new to learn when I went to school. I just kind of thought that I'd pick up where G left off before the work-study field trip. I don't even know how I'll use power on this level." Lex said honestly.

"That's something else that you should probably tell Mrs. Bright before she assigns you to classes." Doctor Coker suggested.

"Is that what we're going to do next?" Lex asked cautiously.

"May I assume that all the testing went well and that there is no need for more intensive tests to be administered?" Doctor Williams asked as he looked primarily at Doctor Coker.

"Lex demonstrated an exceptional aptitude for air, as one might expect. His other abilities are on par with others of his perceived age." Doctor Coker said carefully.

"Lucky has shown marginal aptitude in every discipline that he tested in without showing exceptional ability in any. However, he appears to have the ability to observe and restate spell definitions from any specialty in an equivalent framework." Indra said seriously.

"Well then, if you boys will return to the forms you arrived in, you can be on your way so that you can get your class schedules." Doctor Williams said optimistically.

Lex and Lucky shared a look, then turned in unison in counter-clockwise circles. In one revolution, the boys were standing side by side, wearing matching uniforms.

"Very good." Doctor Williams said approvingly, then quickly added, "Let Mrs. Bright know that I'll have your test records updated shortly, the three of us need a moment to reach consensus before we finalize things."

"I'll tell her." Lex promised.

"Does my uniform still look okay, or should I recast it while I've got the chance?" Lucky asked as he looked down at himself.

"If you have to ask, then it's time to recast. That way you won't have to worry as much about it when we're around other people." Lex explained.

"Is there a problem?" Doctor Williams asked with concern.

"Paul and G didn't have uniforms our size, so we made some illusionary ones to get us by for today. If Lucky is worried about his illusion slipping, then he needs to recast it before we're around regular people." Lex easily explained.

"That seems like a reasonable precaution." Doctor Williams confirmed.

Having received tacit permission, Lucky dispelled his uniform, revealing the red shirt that he was wearing underneath.

Doctor Coker and Doctor Williams exchanged a look, silently sharing their appreciation of the ease with which the boy was performing his magic.

When Lucky started the recasting, Doctor Coker cautiously said, "I'm not a sorcerer, but I've seen enough to know that that's not what we're seeing here."

"This is Lucky's version of a spell that Paul cast using alchemy, a numeric plotter, and I don't really know what all... knowing Paul, it wouldn't surprise me to find a wizard's light in there too." Lex said frankly.

"I don't see the advantage of that." Doctor Coker said honestly.

"Paul can't do sorcery, so this was his way of achieving a similar result." Lex explained.

As Lucky finished his spellcasting, his casual clothing, including his red shirt were covered by a realistic school uniform.

"While I'm not entirely sure what you just did, there's no arguing with the results. Even knowing that your uniform is an illusion, I can't find a single flaw in it." Doctor Coker said seriously.

"It's not an illusion. It's real. It just won't stay real without magic to keep it together." Lucky explained.

Doctor Coker reached forward, then caught himself and asked, "May I?"

Lucky puzzled over that for a moment, but then offered his arm so that Doctor Coker could feel the fabric of his uniform for himself.

After a moment of careful examination, Doctor Coker finally confirmed, "It *is* real."

"It looks like you two are going to make it necessary for us to come up with a new regimen of testing for prospective students." Doctor Williams said, sounding more uneasy than playful.

"Yeah. Well, blame Paul for that. I'm pretty sure if you put any new student with Paul for a couple days before testing that they'd probably do the same as us. It's not that we're better than anyone else, it's that he's really good at inspiring people to realize their hidden talents." Lex said honestly.

"Yes. Having recently seen him at work, I'd have to agree with you about that." Doctor Williams said consideringly.

"Before we left the house, Uncle D and Aunt Beth told us to be sure not to tell people what Lex really is and what kind of magic I can do. Now that you've tested us, do you think we should still do that?" Lucky asked curiously.

"A very good question." Doctor Williams said seriously, then continued, "I believe that allowing people to assume that they understand your origins and capabilities is probably your best course of action."

"I was planning on saying that me and Lucky are Paul and G's cousins from Virginia, which is partly true. If anyone asks about Lucky's magic, I thought we could just say that his mom is a magic thief and that we're trying to figure out what Lucky's magic is, which is *also* kinda true." Lex explained.

"If it's not entirely true, then the more you commit to the falsehood, the more likely you are to be found out. I suggest that if you can't avoid it entirely, you keep your

answers short, vague, and change the subject as soon as possible." Doctor Coker offered seriously.

"If it comes down to it, you can always fall back on the truth." Doctor Williams suggested, then added with a smile, "You can tell them that there are things that you are not at liberty to discuss."

Lex considered that for a moment before saying, "Yeah. If they can't take a hint and back off when we obviously don't want to talk about it, then we probably should go ahead and spell it out for them."

"A witch with a family secret... no one would ever see that coming." Indra added with a barely restrained grin.

"Yes. Another good point." Doctor Williams said with an admiring smile in her direction.

"I guess we'd better get to the office now. I don't think we're going to get more ready than this." Lex said frankly.

"Remember, whether your need, be it medical, magical or even psychological, we will endeavour to help you however we can. Go out into the world knowing that you're not alone; we are here if you need us." Doctor Williams said confidently.

"Most people would just say 'good luck' when they cut you loose. This place really *is* top notch." Lex told Lucky as they walked out the door.

* * * * *

Lex and Lucky walked into the office to find it drastically different from when they left.

There were several people working behind the desks and about a dozen people in loosely formed lines, waiting to be helped.

"Boys, if you'll wait outside Marsha's office, I'll let her know that you're ready." Janice said as she hurried past them to a desk where some impatient looking people were waiting.

"I think I know where it is. Come on." Lex said quietly as he led the way.

* * * * *

Lex and Lucky took seats outside Mrs. Bright's closed office door and watched the people scurrying past them, skittering around as if theirs was the most important job in the school.

"That didn't take as long as I expected. Come in and we'll get you scheduled." Marsha said pleasantly as she stood in the doorway and ushered the boys into her office.

"Doctor Williams wanted us to tell you that he's going to need a few minutes to bring our reports up-to-date. I guess that he and Doctor Coker and Indra are going to talk about what our tests looked like to them before they decide what to write down about us." Lex explained.

"From what Doctor Williams told me a few minutes ago, I can imagine that your situations are unique to the point that they might have to interpret some of what they've witnessed." Marsha said frankly.

"Yeah. I kinda got the feeling that we're not like everyone else." Lex said reluctantly.

"I may have some good news for you, then." Marsha said happily.

"What's that?" Lex hesitantly asked, having the feeling that she wouldn't tell them until he did.

"Regardless of what Doctor Williams has to say about it, *I* have the final word when it comes to your class schedules. If you *want* to be like everyone else, I can probably do that for you. I can give you a safe and predictable daily schedule that, over time, will grind away any troublesome *unique* ideas and help you to become *exactly* like everyone else."

"I don't know if I can be like everyone else, or if I could ever convince myself that I was. But either way, this isn't about me. I'm easy; nothing special. I'm probably just like any other elemental witch in all the ways that count. The only thing I'm worried about is Lucky. He's special and I want to be sure that all of us do whatever we can to help him learn everything that he needs to know to be happy and have a chance at a good life."

Chapter 8

"Doctor Williams seems to think that Lucky should be allowed to monitor the classes of all the different specialties to give him the chance to develop a working knowledge of several different disciplines." Marsha said seriously, then cautiously asked, "What do you think about that?"

"It doesn't sound bad. But no matter what you decide today, you're going to have to keep going back to be sure that things are going the way you're expecting them to and be willing to make changes if they aren't." Lex said speculatively.

"That would be true, except in one circumstance." Marsha said cautiously.

"If you treated Lucky like everyone else and didn't do anything extra to help him." Lex guessed, more than half sure that he was right.

"Essentially, yes." Marsha confirmed.

"So, what are you going to do?" Lex asked cautiously.

"That all depends. What do you want me to do?" Marsha countered.

"Oh, I see now. You're laying it all out to make us ask for the things we want so it feels like we're choosing what to do next instead of being told." Lex said speculatively.

"I've noticed that students who are doing what they do by their own choice tend to be uniquely motivated." Marsha said informatively.

"If you really mean that, then Lucky is going to have to decide for himself. You, me, Doctor Williams, Paul, not even Dad deciding for him will mean as much." Lex said seriously.

"Yes. I agree with that... to a point." Marsha said cautiously.

"What's that?" Lex carefully asked.

"From what I've read in Lucky's transcript and gleaned from my talk with Doctor Williams, thus far, Lucky has had very little say in his situation. I don't think, right this minute, that he's aware enough of certain things or of the long-term consequences, to make an informed decision." Marsha said frankly.

"So what are you going to do?" Lex asked cautiously.

"I was thinking that we could start off by putting Lucky in a place where he could have some accommodating classmates to help him catch up in his classes and adapt to his new situation. In such an environment, he might even be able to develop friendships that could potentially carry on, even if he decides to change disciplines at some point." Mrs. Bright said seriously.

"Do you really have someplace like that?" Lex asked slowly, feeling that Marsha might be leading him into a trap.

"That depends on whether or not you'd feel comfortable having Lucky attend Sorcery classes with you and G." Marsha said frankly.

"But Lucky doesn't know *anything* about sorcery, and even when he tries to use it, he rewrites the spells to work in his own private language that only he understands." Lex hurried to explain.

"Doctor Williams cautioned me about that. It is my intention to have Lucky attending the class as an observer, attending sorcery classes as a member of the 'Witchcraft' discipline. Due to that, the teachers in other specialties will know that Lucky is 'visiting' their classes and they won't demand his adherence to their protocols." Marsha said confidently.

"So, we can get Lucky started going to classes with me and G, then later on, once he's used to how things work, he can go out and try other classes to see what he can do there." Lex said speculatively.

"I imagine that he might want to try out Wizardry soon, if for no other reason than to spend time with his other family." Marsha said with a smile at the boy.

"You're awfully quiet, Lucky. What do you think about all this?" Lex asked Lucky curiously.

"The doctor was saying that I'm a special kind of witch that does magic different from regular witches. Is that right?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That's pretty much what he said." Lex confirmed.

"So I'm going to go to classes with you where I can learn how other witches do their magic, so I can try to do what they do and maybe figure out how to do my own. Right?" Lucky again asked to confirm his understanding.

"Yeah. It sounded to me like that's what they were shooting for." Lex said seriously, then looked at Marsha with question.

"That would be one possible outcome and I think it would probably be the most easily accomplished." Marsha confirmed, then added, "The only other reasonable course of action I can come up with at this early stage, would be to assign an educational expert to work with Lucky one-on-one to help him investigate the extent of his different abilities."

"So you'd lock him in a little room and he'd be trying to learn everything all by himself?" Lex asked with concern.

"No. I'm sure it wouldn't end up going that way. But Lucky would most likely lose a bit of his self-determination in that scenario. The structure of his learning would be provided by someone else and he would be expected to conform to it." Marsha admitted.

"So, if Lucky goes to classes with me and doesn't learn anything, then you'll send him to the special ed teacher?" Lex asked bluntly.

"Educational expert." Marsha corrected.

Lex held her gaze, silently standing behind what he had said.

"What's most important is that Lucky be given every opportunity to discover and develop his unique ability. If we try something and it doesn't work, then we'll try something else." Marsha said reasonably.

"I guess if it was just going to be me and Lucky doing this, that might worry me. But we're going to have Paul and G and probably all their friends helping us before it's all over." Lex said frankly.

"Uncle D and Aunt Beth will help us too." Lucky quickly added.

Lex nodded, then said, "Even though I've only been alive a couple days, I made a few friends of my own on the work-study. I know that Corabeth and Miss Oaken would help us if we needed something."

"It sounds like you've got a nice support network in place." Marsha said pleasantly, then added in a more serious voice, "Good. You're likely going to need it."

That caught both Lucky and Lex's attention.

"You're some of the youngest students here. We don't have classes structured for your age group. Not only are you going to be taking classes that are more advanced than you may be prepared for, but you're also starting in the middle of the school year." Mrs. Bright said ominously.

Lex looked to Lucky to see his reaction.

"My old school was boring. It was all talk." Lucky said distantly, then focused on Mrs. Bright and continued, "They told us things. They didn't *teach* us to do anything. When I wanted to do something, they threatened to curse me."

Lex and Marsha were equally surprised by the venom behind Lucky's words.

"If you'll teach me how to use my magic, how to *do* things, I *will* learn." Lucky said seriously.

Mrs. Bright glanced at Lex to see his reaction.

"Yeah. I'll help him." Lex stammered.

"Then it sounds like we've got the beginning of a plan." Marsha said as she began to type on her computer.

A moment later, she finished typing and said, "We'll see how this works for you, and if you notice that you're having any problems, let me know and we'll make adjustments if necessary."

Lex and Lucky waited silently to be told what to do next.

"I would normally send one of the staff with you to introduce you, but we seem to be having a bit of a rush in business at the moment. Lex, since you already know your way around, would you mind going to Mrs. Sondheim's classroom so that Lucky can meet with her?" Mrs. Bright asked hopefully.

"I don't mind, but I don't know who that is." Lex said honestly.

"She's the senior professor of Witchcraft. She doesn't interact directly with the students very often, she's more of an administrator. But she's ultimately in charge of quite a few of the subjects that you'll be taking and she's the best person to streamline the process of integrating you into the existing classes. I've sent her a message so that she'll know what's expected. Just introduce yourselves and she can see that Lucky has everything he needs, from an academic standpoint. Here are your class schedules." Marsha said as she handed each boy a small stack of papers.

"I don't know where Mrs. Sondheim's office is." Lex reluctantly admitted.

"It's just past the Sorcery classroom, next door on the right." Marsha said simply.

"I don't think I ever went past the Sorcery classroom." Lex said honestly.

"Not many people have reason to." Mrs. Bright said frankly.

"What about Lex? He doesn't need to talk to her at all, does he?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Not really. This has to do with classes that he's already familiar with and presumably has an aptitude for. He should be able to pick up right where G left off before the work-study." Marsha said seriously.

"Since you want for me to make decisions for myself, do you think it'd be better if I went to see Mrs. Sondheim alone?" Lucky asked uncertainly.

"No. As soon as you've finished with Mrs. Sondheim, you'll be going to meet with Professor Woo." Marsha said seriously, then looked directly at Lex and continued, "I believe you know who that is."

"Yeah." Lex quietly confirmed.

After a moment, Lucky indignantly said, "Well *I* don't know who it is."

"He's the senior professor of sorcery." Lex said seriously.

"That's right. You can meet with Professor Sondheim to get Lucky's regular classes ironed out, then you can meet with Professor Woo to get the sorcery taken care of." Marsha explained.

"So should I tell Professor Woo what I am and where I came from?" Lex asked cautiously.

"You will need to get into the habit of determining how much a given person needs to know, and how much you're willing to trust them. Knowing Professor Woo as I do, I probably *would* share with him as much as he needs to know to do his job in regard to me. You'll have to decide for yourself what you're going to do."

"What about Mrs. Sondheim? What should I tell her?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I've already told her that you're a full-fledged magic mimic. Knowing that, she'll see to it that you aren't held to the same requirements as the students with specialized magical gifts. I would expect her to instruct Professor Bielecki to tell his teachers that you won't be held to the same standards as the other students in spellcasting. Successful completion of the spell will be your objective while the rest of the class works on developing the proper form." Mrs. Bright said carefully.

"But that just applies to Lucky? I still have to perform all my spells perfectly to get a good grade?" Lex asked to be sure.

"Yes. Unless there's some reason that traditional spell structures wouldn't work for you." Marsha said simply.

"No. I just wanted to be sure what's expected of me." Lex said quickly.

"I don't see any reason that who and what you are should make any difference in the educational opportunities that you're provided. Until I'm presented with evidence to the contrary, I plan to treat you exactly the same as any of the other students." Mrs. Bright said honestly, then thought to ask, "Would you have me do otherwise?"

"No... I mean, I kind of thought that me being an elemental might be kind of a big deal." Lex said frankly.

"We have other elementals attending this school. Most of them prefer to keep it to themselves and continue on like any other student." Marsha said frankly.

"I know about Dex. I never thought about there being others." Lex said honestly.

"There are a few..." Marsha was saying when a beep from her desk phone interrupted her.

"Yes?" Marsha asked cautiously.

"*Mr. Darroch is here to see you.*" Janice said cautiously.

"Please send him in." Marsha said pleasantly, then released the intercom button.

"What's dad doing here?" Lex asked cautiously.

"You'll have to ask him." Marsha said frankly.

Both boys turned in unison at a gentle knocking on the office door.

* * * * *

"Janice said that the boys were in here. How did things end up going?" D asked as Marsha ushered him into the room.

"I have their academics scheduled and I was just about to send them on their way to meet with their senior professors." Marsha said as she gestured for him to join his sons by her desk.

"What did the tests say about Lucky?" D asked seriously.

"Why don't I step out for a moment and let the boys explain that to you?" Marsha suggested as she walked toward the door.

"If you think that's best." D said hesitantly.

"I actually have a few things that I need to do just this moment. If you'll step out and find me when you're done, I'll answer any questions that you still have after you've had your talk." Marsha said before slipping out the door.

Lucky ran to D and hugged him firmly.

"How are you guys doing?" D asked gently as he returned the hug.

"I think all my stuff was pretty much like we expected, except that I turned out to be a little more powerful than I thought in my half-transformed state. That might take a little work to master." Lex said frankly.

"I think that G and I can both help you when it comes to that. Even though our abilities aren't all the same, they're all based in air and have similar mechanics behind them. If we put our heads together I'm sure that we can come up with something that will work for you." D said confidently.

"I can't wait to try." Lex said quietly, sounding to be a little choked up.

"What about you, Lucky? What did Doctor Williams have to say?" D asked as he held the boy close to his side.

"He said that I'm a child of the sun." Lucky said simply.

There was a long silent moment before D finally said, "Although I've heard the phrase before, I don't recall it having any particular magical meaning."

"From the way it sounded to me, regular magic, the kind you and me have, is kinda like a tree, all up and down, where everyone can reach the base, but only the very best can reach the top. Paul and Beth's magic is another tree and just about everyone else's magic is like that. Sorcery is one grove of trees, wizardry is another and all the rest of the different kinds of magic are all different kinds of trees, they're all growing up as tall as they can."

"Okay. I think I can visualize that." D said slowly.

"Our magic is up and down. Lucky's is side-to-side." Lex said simply.

"So he can jump from tree to tree?" D asked cautiously.

"I think him jumping from branch to branch, tree to tree, is what it's like when he's mimicking. I'm not sure how the whole 'child of the sun' thing works into that part of it, but it's the best way I could visualize what Doctor Williams was telling us." Lex said seriously.

"No. That's fine. You've at least opened the door on my understanding. I'm sure that we'll all discover more about it as time goes on." D said seriously, then asked, "Did Doctor Williams have anything else to say about the child of the sun?"

"It's really rare." Lex said as he thought over all that they were told.

"He said that I'm going to have to choose the kind of magic that I'm going to want to have when I'm older because I'm only going to get to keep the magic that I use the most." Lucky tried to explain.

"He also said that you would be able to mix magic together that other people can't and the more you use your special magic, the stronger you'll get with it. You may not end up with a lot of different spells, but you'll have one or two really big ones that no one else in the whole world can cast." Lex said seriously.

"Did he say anything about the gods being involved in this?" D asked cautiously.

"No. He never mentioned them. Why?" Lex asked curiously.

"It just sounds like something that they'd do." D said frankly.

"Anyway, since Lucky has monkey-branching magic that isn't like anyone else's, Mrs. Bright is making sure that the teachers know that he can't cast spells the regular way." Lex said seriously.

"It sounds like she's done the groundwork so that you'll have everything that you'll need to get by at this school." D said speculatively.

"Yeah. And if things aren't working for some reason, I feel like we could come here and tell her and that she'd actually listen and maybe even do something about it." Lex said honestly.

"Well, if that doesn't work out, just remember that you can always come to me. I do have *some* influence." D quietly offered.

"It looks like Mrs. Bright is setting it up so that we can do things for ourselves. That way, if she has to help someone else for a while, things aren't going to fall apart for us. We'll be used to taking care of things on our own and won't be standing around waiting for someone to tell us what to do next." Lex explained.

"I knew there was a reason that I wanted my kids to go to this school." D said with a smile, then added more seriously, "Try to keep in mind that one of the things you're here to learn is how to be *adults*, not adult-aged dependent children."

"I don't think my old school agrees with you." Lucky said frankly.

"Actually, that was an elementary school. They're *supposed to* treat you like kids and tell you step-by-step what to do. But once they've taught you the basics and given you the tools, you come to a school like this one to use what you've been taught to develop skills for your adult life." D said simply.

"They threatened to curse him if he used his magic." Lex said frankly.

"Oh. I didn't hear about that part." D said quietly, then continued, "Forget what I said about your old school then. If they're teaching you to be ashamed of your magic or threatening you for being what you are, then they're WRONG. Now that you're here, use the tools that you've been given and do your best. Try to learn the things you need to know when you're in charge of your own life and thinking about starting your own family."

"Me?" Lucky asked with surprise.

"Remember why your mom sent you here. It's so you can have a chance at your best life." D said frankly.

"I thought she sent me here because she didn't know what else to do with me." Lucky said honestly.

"If your mom wanted you to keep going to your old school, you'd be there right now. Nobody tells your mom what to do." D said seriously.

"I guess that's true." Lucky reluctantly admitted.

"So that means that you're here because it's what your mom wanted for you. She thought it would be the best way to give you a decent future." D continued.

"You don't think she was just trying to get rid of me?" Lucky hesitantly asked.

"No. If she were, there are far easier ways that she could have done that, and she likely would not have gotten me involved." D said as he met Lucky's gaze.

"Think about it, Lucky. She could've just let them curse you." Lex added.

At Lucky's curious look, Lex explained, "It wouldn't hurt you and it'd keep you out of trouble. You were already there, so it wouldn't cost her any extra time, trouble or money. Leaving you where you were would have been the easiest thing in the world for her to do."

"But it would have been wrong." D said emphatically. "Your mom swallowed her pride and asked me to do her a favor. You know how independent your mom is. That had to have nearly killed her."

"Yeah. She doesn't like owing anybody anything." Lucky confirmed.

"I can respect that." D said seriously.

"By the way, what are you doing here? Did you come back to check on us?" Lex asked curiously.

"Actually, I'm back to interview a candidate for a job opening." D said reasonably.

"For a job in Brynnhollow?" Lex guessed.

"Yes. How did you know that?" D asked cautiously.

"We overheard Doctor Williams talking to Doctor Coker about it. Michael said that he'd take the job, but he's nervous about not being prepared for it." Lex said carefully.

"Do you know this Michael person?" D asked seriously.

"Yeah. He helps out in Doctor Williams health and healing classes. Sometimes he teaches the class, when Doctor Williams is busy with other things." Lex said frankly.

"How do you think he'll do as a teacher in Brynnhollow?" D cautiously asked.

"I think he's a good teacher and a good person, so I hope that he'll do a good job for you. But I don't know if he'll be able to handle being somewhere without electricity and Internet." Lex said honestly.

"I'll be sure to tell him about that, so that he can base his choice on realistic expectations." D said seriously.

"If you want to go now, we can walk out with you. We're going to talk to Mrs. Sondheim about starting the gen ed classes in the middle of the year." Lex said frankly.

"Do you think you're up to it?" D asked cautiously.

"Yeah. We got this." Lex said confidently.

"Good. Then let's go." D said as he gave Lucky one final squeeze of a hug before releasing him.

The trio walked as one toward the door, ready to face the challenges that lay before them.

* * * * *

The boys were quiet after leaving D at Doctor William's office. They were more preoccupied with reviewing their conversation with D than with their impending meeting with the senior professor.

Lex guided them through the maze of hallways, unerringly to Professor Sondheim's door.

Before he could develop a case of nerves about it, Lex led the way through the open doorway.

"Lex and Lucky?" The woman behind the reception desk automatically asked.

"Yes." Lex answered for both of them.

"Professor Sondheim is waiting for you; down this hall, second door on your left." The woman said as she gestured in the direction that they needed to go.

"Thank you." Lex said quietly before leading the way.

* * * * *

Lex gently knocked on the closed door and heard a woman's low voice bid him to enter.

Lex and Lucky cautiously walked into the room that looked as though it might have fallen through a time warp, directly from the 1940's. A sweet and spicy aroma permeated the air which added an 'exotic' quality to the overall space.

"Please, come in and have a seat." An elderly woman said in a husky voice. She wore a woman's version of a three-piece suit appropriate to the era the rest of the room seemed to be taken from.

Lex and Lucky did as they were told and sat down side by side on the formal settee, adorned with lace doilies on the arms.

"Turkish delight?" Professor Sondheim asked as she gestured toward the coffee table where a silver platter with gelatinous cubes dusted with powdered sugar was prominently displayed.

"No, thank you." Lex said uneasily.

Lucky shook his head to indicate his refusal.

"Mrs. Bright tells me that you two are going to be starting classes today, and that *one* of you is going to need some special accommodation." Professor Sondheim said seriously.

"Yes ma'am. Lucky's style of magic is different from most peoples. He can do just about any spell that he tries, but he can't use his magic the same way other people use theirs. He has to change the spell to be able to use it." Lex struggled to explain.

"Mrs. Bright said that he was a mimic. I have to admit that I don't have much experience with such things, but I have read a few case histories. As I recall, a result oriented grading strategy has been known to yield favorable outcomes."

"Yeah. If you can keep the teachers from jumping on Lucky about his technique, then he should be able to keep up with just about anything magical that they throw at him." Lex said seriously.

"What about you? Your name is Lexington, right?" Professor Sondheim asked cautiously.

"Yes, ma'am." Lex hesitantly answered.

"Mrs. Bright didn't tell me more than your name and that you would also be starting classes today. Can I take it that you're not another mimic?"

"No ma'am. I'm an air elemental." Lex said timidly.

"A sylph? In human form? Living among witches as one of them?" Professor Sondheim asked with surprise.

"Yeah. There's a whole lot to it, but basically, I was created from an illusionary portrait. Since the illusion was human looking, so am I." Lex said uneasily.

"If that's the case, then I suppose that you're rather fortunate. Things might have turned out a multitude of other ways and in most of them you wouldn't have an opportunity to lead a productive life as a participating member of a society." Professor Sondheim said speculatively.

"I guess I *am* fortunate. The 'society' that I'm a member of is our family. It's the best thing in my life." Lex said frankly.

"So, you're going to be starting classes along with Lucky?" Professor Sondheim asked curiously.

"Yes. But it's like I've been here all along. I was created with a lifetime of memories from the person who made me." Lex said honestly.

"So you remember someone else's life as if it were your own?" Professor Sondheim asked uneasily.

"Yes. But that works out for us, since I'll be able to help Lucky find his way around until he gets used to things."

"Mrs. Bright said that Lucky would be listed as a practitioner of witchcraft. That will give us the latitude to allow him to experience a variety of specialties." Professor Sondheim said slowly.

"I kinda thought all of it, all the magic, was witchcraft." Lex said honestly.

"Different people use the same terms to mean different things. For our purposes, witchcraft doesn't encompass 'everything' so much as it includes 'everything else'. It works well for people who are aware of magic but have little or no talent or for people with abilities that are so specialized or dangerous that they can't practically be used." Professor Sondheim explained.

"So that's why Lucky was put here, because he doesn't fit into one of the other magical specialties?" Lex asked curiously.

"I think he could probably make his way decently well in one of the specialties if he tried. But that very well might limit his opportunity to discover how to use his abilities." Professor Sondheim said reasonably.

"They said that because he's a mimic, he needs to be around a lot of magic so that he can try different things out." Lex carefully explained.

"Yes. That sounds reasonable." Professor Sondheim agreed, then asked, "What about you, Lexington? What specialty will you be enrolled in?"

"Sorcery, I think. It should be listed here on my class schedule." Lex said as he quickly looked at the top page.

"Since you haven't attended any classes yet, it's the perfect time to evaluate your situation and challenge a few of the assumptions that you've made." Professor Sondheim said seriously.

"I'm an air elemental. What could I do besides sorcery?" Lex asked cautiously.

"That's the question now, isn't it? Have you *tried* to do anything else?" Professor Sondheim asked persistently.

"No. As far as I know, there's nothing else that I *can* do."

"While sorcery is most commonly associated with air, the truth of the matter is that quite a few of the disciplines of wizardry use it too." Professor Sondheim said carefully.

"I thought Wizardry used fire." Lex said honestly.

"They can use fire to open doorways, but portals of air aren't unheard of. I believe the celestials are known to frequently make use of them." Professor Sondheim said speculatively.

"Paul would have a fit if I started using angelic magic." Lex chuckled to Lucky.

"Pardon?" Professor Sondheim asked curiously.

"He's my adoptive brother... or cousin. I haven't got it all worked out yet, but we live together and have the same last name." Lex said frankly.

"And he's a demon." Lucky quietly explained.

"A half-demon." Lex quickly corrected, then abruptly added, "But he's really nice. He's a fantastic brother and a good person besides."

Lucky nodded his whole-hearted agreement.

"But he would be 'displeased' if you specialized in the use of celestial magic?" Professor Sondheim asked curiously.

"No. I mean, yes. If I *chose* to study celestial magic Paul might look at it like I'm against him because it goes against what he is and it's something that can seriously hurt him." Lex said honestly.

"It was just a thought. Besides, there are several specialties that use air that are *quite* infernal. Those that summon through ether usually have a significant air affinity." Professor Sondheim said frankly.

"Someone I met, her name is Corabeth, she's in wizardry and she has an air affinity. I even worked on casting an air-based spell with her." Lex said in realization.

"Are you trying to get Lex to change from sorcery to wizardry?" Lucky asked curiously.

"No." Professor Sondheim said with such assurance that Lucky immediately believed her.

After a moment for that to sink in, she quietly added, "I simply wanted for the two of you to look at the opportunities that you have before you. You're in a position to explore your interests and develop that which drives your passion. You don't automatically go where the 'air' practitioners go. Try a few things while you've got

the chance, then, once you've had a good look around, choose something that suits your talents *and* your interests."

"So what are we supposed to do next?" Lex asked uncertainly.

"If you're interested, I could make the change to your records to reflect that *both* of you are in the 'Witchcraft' specialty, under my direct supervision." Professor Sondheim said with a serene smile.

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence before Lex realized that she was waiting for a response.

"Yeah, I mean, yes, thank you. I think that we'd both like a chance to try things out and decide what we want to do." Lex said quickly.

"Is that how you feel, Lucky?" Professor Sondheim asked curiously.

"It sounds like what I was going to do anyway, but it'll be nice if Lex can go with me and won't get stuffed into classes that make him be like regular witches. If he's an elemental, then he can probably do things that other witches can't. But he won't want to if he's trained to be just like them." Lucky said seriously.

"You're very insightful for someone so young." Professor Sondheim said cautiously.

"I just know what it feels like when someone tries to make you be like everyone else when you're not. I don't want that for me or for Lex either."

"So, when we've figured out what we want to do, should we come back here to you and let you know?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Yes. I think I'd like that very much." Professor Sondheim said with the beginning of a smile, then she added, "Whatever you decide, be prepared to defend your decisions."

"Yeah. I think I'd like that too." Lex said with a little surprise at the admission.

Lucky nodded his agreement to the arrangement.

Chapter 9

"Professor Woo?" Lex gently asked from the open doorway, to draw his attention.

"Yes?" The professor asked cautiously as he looked up from some papers that he had been reading.

"The two of us are going to be starting your class this afternoon and we were supposed to meet you now so that you could... do whatever it is that you do for new students." Lex said frankly.

"We've gotten ahead of ourselves. Come in and have a seat, then tell me a little about yourselves." Professor Woo said warmly.

Lex led the way inside and sat down in one of the chairs across from the cluttered desk.

Lucky seemed uncertain, but eventually followed.

"We're Lex and Lucky Darroch and even though we're both enrolled in Witchcraft as a specialty, we thought that we'd like to try learning Sorcery together before we look into anything else." Lex cautiously explained.

"Darroch?" Professor Woo slowly asked as he took note of the boys' dark hair and eyes and other similar features.

Both boys waited anxiously under his scrutiny.

"Lex, was it? That name sounds familiar. Wasn't that the name of G Darroch's rather impressive self-portrait illusion?" Professor Woo asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That was me. But I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tell everyone. Starting out as a new person is hard enough, having everyone know that I'm not completely 'real' might be a little too much for me to deal with all at once." Lex said frankly.

"*You're* G's illusion?" Professor Woo asked dubiously.

"Yeah. But G having an identical twin all of a sudden would raise a lot of questions, especially with our non-magical friends. It's best if I just change how I look." Lex said as he gave the internal push to let go of his 'Cousin Lex' form and become his waking self.

"So, are you telling me that you're an illusion that came to life?" Professor Woo asked slowly as he stared at the exact duplicate of his student.

"Yes. But there was a lot more to it than that, and I'm not allowed to talk about all of it. The part you need to know about is that G was holding an ancient relic of air and brought up my illusion so that he could sort of be in two places at once. Somehow with that and the chaos with magic spewing all over the place like a fire hose, I became what I am." Lex said frankly.

"And just what is that, if I may ask?" Professor Woo asked cautiously.

"By the loosest definition, I'm an air elemental, a sylph. In reality, I seem to be more like an elemental witch than anything else." Lex said honestly.

"An elemental witch based in air." Professor Woo stated more than asked.

"Yeah. I know elemental witches aren't really that rare. Just the part about me being made instead of born makes me kinda special." Lex said uncomfortably.

"You really *are* the image of G, aren't you?" Professor Woo said appreciatively.

"He does good work." Lex confirmed.

"What about you? I know that elementals don't always get the magical payload that one might expect." Professor Woo said seriously.

"I haven't really had a chance to try everything out yet, but as far as I know, I have about the same talents as G. At least, I haven't run into any air-based spells that I haven't been able to do yet." Lex said honestly.

"Have you had the opportunity to try your hand at any illusions?" Professor Woo asked curiously.

Rather than answer verbally, Lex dispelled his illusionary clothing to reveal the casual jeans and red t-shirt that he was wearing underneath.

When Lucky saw what he was doing, he likewise released his own spell.

"Very nice! I didn't have the first clue that you were wearing illusionary clothing." Professor Woo said appreciatively.

"Lucky's wasn't an illusion, it was more of a matter construct, but he covered it with an illusionary sleeve to smooth it out, so it's still pretty impressive." Lex explained.

"Really? That sounds like an interesting technique. Would you mind showing me?" Professor Woo asked hopefully.

"Sure. But, just so you know, I can't do magic the same way that you do." Lucky said before slowly and precisely going through the steps to recast the cylindrical construct.

"I don't recognize the style of magic that he's using. What *is* that?" Professor Woo asked cautiously.

"When Lucky sees magic, it's like he can see inside it and translate it into the kind of magic that he can perform." Lex tried to explain.

The oddly shaped uniform came into being, but it looked like Lucky was wearing dryer vent hoses over most of his body.

Before Lex or Professor Woo could comment about it, Lucky enacted his modified version of the 'changey' and the stiff cylinders suddenly conformed to the shape of his body.

"I'd be interested in finding a variation of that for my own illusionary constructs. That looks like it would save a lot of time." Professor Woo said honestly.

"If you like that, you'll *love* this." Lex said with a smile of pride for his brother.

Professor Woo watched carefully and was surprised by the transformation of the clothing that Lucky appeared to be wearing. One minute it was impossible and unreal and the next the boy's uniform looked normal to the point of being completely unremarkable.

"The coolest thing is, you can touch it. Not only does it look real, it feels it too." Lex said proudly.

Lucky automatically extended his arm, in case Professor Woo wanted to try it for himself.

After a moment of hesitation, Professor Woo indeed *did* feel Lucky's sleeve and went so far as to slowly feel the button on his cuff.

"This technique is like the next step beyond illusions." Professor Woo said in wonder.

"I know it looks that way, but check this out." Lex said in prelude, then turned to Lucky and asked, "Can you make a carrot for us?"

"No." Lucky answered honestly.

"Why not?" Lex asked curiously.

"Because I don't have a spell for that." Lucky said simply.

"But you know what a carrot looks like, don't you? Can't you improvise a spell to make a carrot?" Professor Woo asked seriously.

"If I took some time and worked on it, I could probably come up with something that you might be able to guess is supposed to be a carrot. I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be very good though." Lucky regretfully explained.

"Lucky's a magic mimic. If he can copy someone else's magic, he can do something great with it. And if he can copy *two* people's magic, he can combine them in a way that the original casters of the spell probably couldn't." Lex said seriously.

"So that uniform spell is him copying someone else?"

"Actually, I think that one comes from him copying three of us at once. Me, G, and Paul were all working on it at the same time and Lucky picked up on all of them and combined them into the uniform that he's wearing." Lex calmly explained.

"Still, that's such a versatile technique. It would be nice if we could find a way to replicate it using standard magic." Professor Woo said seriously.

"I can talk to Paul about it when we get home. He's got a talent for doing multiple spells simultaneously. He could probably help us figure out how two or three of us could cast the spell at the same time to get the same result that Lucky gets on his own." Lex said speculatively.

"I think it might be worth at least investigating. Even if you had to use charm magic to do part of it, the savings in time would probably be worth it." Professor Woo said consideringly.

"I'll see what Paul says about it." Lex promised, then thought to ask, "So are we alright to sit in on your class as part of the Witchcraft observers?"

"I was wondering about that. Why are you just monitoring sorcery? You obviously have the talent for it." Professor Woo asked curiously.

"To me, sorcery is G's thing. Not only is he good at it, but it's also something that sets him apart and makes him special. Even though he probably wouldn't say

anything about it, I really don't want to horn in on that part of his life." Lex explained seriously.

"I suppose I can see that." Professor Woo conceded.

"The other side of that coin is, I want something that I can call my own. I'd like to feel like I'm good at something that's just mine." Lex said timidly.

After a long awkward moment, Lucky quietly said, "I can copy someone else's sorcery, but I don't know yet if I can do it all on my own. I'd like to go to your class to figure out what I can and can't do, but I don't want to be part of the class, like, full-time, forever, at least until I know if I can do my own sorcery or not."

"Well, if you're a mimic, I suppose it's important for you to experience a variety of magics and practitioners to see if you can picture yourself fitting in amongst them." Professor Woo said carefully.

"Professor Sondheim seemed to think that it'd be good for me to take a look at some air specialties other than sorcery. Once we've taken a good look at sorcery and gotten used to our other classes, we may give that a try." Lex said carefully.

"Speaking of that, the third period bell will be ringing shortly. Do you need to discuss anything else with me before you go to your next class?" Professor Woo asked cautiously.

"No. We just wanted you to know that Lucky can't do sorcery like a regular sorcerer. If you're okay with that, we should be able to do just fine in your class." Lex said seriously.

"As long as you're learning the lessons that you need to know, I won't worry about the small stuff." Professor Woo said simply.

Before the boys could respond, the bell rang, signalling the countdown until the next class started.

"Thank you for talking with us, Professor. We'll see you again after lunch." Lex said respectfully.

"Yes. I'll see you then. I hope the rest of your placements go well." Professor Woo said warmly.

* * * * *

"What do we have next?" Lex asked as he leafed through his class schedule, in search of Friday.

"Third period? I think it says 'spelling'. Is that like ABC or Abracadabra?" Lucky asked curiously.

"The second one. C'mon, it's not far. This way." Lex said as he walked quickly down the hallway.

"Why would they give me spelling if that's the one thing that I can't do at all?" Lucky asked as he fought to keep up.

"I don't know. But I think Mrs. Bright probably knew what she was doing. Maybe she wants for you to figure out how to fake it when you're around other witches." Lex cautiously suggested.

"I'm just glad that you're going to be there with me. I'd be really scared if I was going in there all by myself." Lucky said frankly.

"I can promise you that there's nothing to be scared of. I remember taking this class with Paul and G last year." Lex said honestly.

"If you already took it, you shouldn't have to take it again." Lucky said with concern.

"Actually, this is probably a really good thing for me. The only kind of magic that I know how to use is G's. He really worked hard to make his sorcery do everything that he wanted it to, but I think that this time around, I'd like to try something else." Lex said introspectively.

"Like what?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I don't know yet. Maybe you could help me figure that out." Lex said with a smile.

Lucky seemed surprised by the suggestion, but not at all against the idea.

* * * * *

"Mrs. Herdez?" Lex asked as he and Lucky approached.

"Yes?" Mrs. Herdez cautiously answered at the sight of the unfamiliar pair of boys.

"We're supposed to start your class today." Lex said uncomfortably as he held forward his class schedule as evidence.

Mrs. Herdez looked from Lex to Lucky, obviously recognizing the physical characteristics they shared.

"What are your names?" Mrs. Herdez asked cautiously.

"Lex and Lucky Darroch." Lex answered for both of them.

Mrs. Herdez looked at her clipboard for a moment, then muttered, "I don't see you here."

"Mrs. Bright just scheduled us a few minutes ago. You might not have gotten the update yet." Lex quietly offered.

"I suppose that's one use for these things." Mrs. Herdez said as she grudgingly signed into her computer, which had been timed-out in a screensaver.

"Even if you hadn't told me your names were Darroch, I would have guessed. Your family features really do carry through." Mrs. Herdez said as she navigated through menus to get to the classroom scheduling spreadsheet that she was looking for.

"You should see it when the whole family gets together. It's really super creepy how much everyone looks alike." Lex said frankly.

"There you are." Mrs. Herdez finally said with accomplishment, then fell silent as she read for a moment.

Lex and Lucky waited anxiously for her reaction, not able to judge her mood thus far.

"One of you is a mimic?" Mrs. Herdez finally asked curiously.

"Yes Ma'am. *I* am." Lucky timidly admitted.

"Then it seems that you and I have an interesting adventure ahead of us." Mrs. Herdez said warmly.

"We do?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Yes. How many opportunities do you think we have to experience an entirely different magical paradigm? It is my hope that between us, we can discover how

you can make the most of your gifts, while also exploring a unique new magical superstructure." Mrs. Herdez said happily.

"So you're not going to try to force me to use the same spells as everyone else?" Lucky asked to be sure.

"I will ask you to attempt to use the traditional method, if only to demonstrate to what degree that it is, or isn't, effective." Ms. Herdez said seriously.

"You seem awfully excited about this." Lex cautiously observed.

"I'm not *only* a teacher, I'm also a researcher. The fact of the matter is that for long periods of time, I don't have anything to research, so I content myself with helping the next generations develop an appreciation for confident and forthright spellcasting." Mrs. Herdez explained.

"I kinda thought it was just a job." Lex weakly responded.

"When something like this comes up, it's an opportunity. The rest of the time... it *does* keep food on the table." Mrs. Herdez conceded.

"Am I going to be doing things like everyone else or are you going to have me doing my own stuff?" Lucky asked anxiously.

"A little of each, I suppose. But for right now, I'm going to put you with a group and we'll see how that works out." Mrs. Herdez said seriously.

"We don't really know anyone in here. Do you want us to just be a team of our own? We already know that we work well together." Lex explained as he looked around the room at the variety of unfamiliar people.

"No. I have a team in mind for you. I can't quite say why, but I get the feeling that putting you with Erica and Lucia might end up being the best thing for all involved." Mrs. Herdez said speculatively.

"I don't know who that is." Lex quietly admitted.

"Here. Allow me to introduce you." Mrs. Herdez said as she stood from behind her desk.

Lucky and Lex shared a look, then reluctantly followed when Mrs. Herdez stepped away.

* * * * *

"Attention everyone! We have a pair of new students with us today, Lex and Lucky Darroch. I hope that when you have the chance, you will take a moment to introduce yourselves and welcome them to our class." Mrs. Herdez said a little too happily.

After a moment for a flurry of muttered greetings to pass, Mrs. Herdez led the boys to a pair of girls sitting together at a table.

"Erica, Lucia, I'd like for you to meet Lex and Lucky." Mrs. Herdez said pleasantly.

"Oh God! You're not sticking them with us, are you?" The blonde, Erica, whined with an impatient eyeroll for good measure.

"Yes. And *do* keep in mind that group projects determine the grade of the *entire* group, not just the one presenting at the time." Mrs. Herdez said with no small measure of satisfaction.

"So you want for *us* to carry them?" The dark-haired, biracial girl, Lucia, asked with disgust.

"No. But part of what you're here to learn is how to be part of a team. If you choose to reject the teamwork aspect of your training, it will, of course, be reflected in your grade." Mrs. Herdez said professionally and informatively.

After a long tense moment, Erica turned to Lex and firmly said, "Just stay out of our way and do what you're told."

Lex looked to Mrs. Herdez and with his sarcasm turned up to eleven, he said, "Thanks."

Mrs. Herdez restrained a chuckle at the reaction, then leaned in to confidentially ask, "Do you think that you won't encounter such people out in the 'real' world?"

Lex was surprised by the question and after a moment, he honestly said, "No. I didn't think about that."

"Now you have something new to think about." Mrs. Herdez said with a grin at him, then added more seriously, "Your group will need to perform a spell so that I can judge your skill and accuracy. Your new teammates will be able to fill you in on the requirements."

"What about Lucky? He can't do normal magic." Lex asked anxiously.

Mrs. Herdez glanced at Lucky and smiled before responding, "I will be the one grading you, so explain to your teammates as much as you feel that you need too... or don't. I suspect that it will serve you best if you get into the habit of deciding such things for yourselves sooner rather than later."

Lex slowly nodded his acceptance of her words as she walked back to her desk.

"She has waaay too much faith in us." Lex said frankly.

* * * * *

"Rikki does water and I do air, so that means when it comes to spelling, that we're kinda stuck doing basic." Lucia said frankly.

"If you could find a basic spell that leans toward 'mist', there might be something that both of you could cast that not everyone else could." Lex cautiously suggested.

"What are you even doing here, anyway? Shouldn't you be in elementary school?" Erica asked snottily.

"We skipped ahead a few grades." Lex said nonchalantly, then glanced at Lucky to see how he was doing.

Lucky seemed to be soaking it all in, ready to stand behind Lex in whatever story he decided to reveal about their pasts.

"So you're smart?" Lucia asked cautiously.

"Compared to elementary schoolers, yeah. Compared to the people in this class... I don't know yet. I guess we'll all find out together." Lex said frankly.

"Do you know of any mist spells that we might be able to use for a spelling project?" Lucia asked hopefully, then seemed to wither under the reproachful glare of Erica.

"Yeah. There's this one where you can take a cup of water and use air to mix with it and make it look like it's disappeared, but when you reverse the spell, you can bring the water back and fill the cup again. The good thing about it is, if you can work with either air or water, you can shape it and make it do things that someone else can't." Lex said slowly.

Lucia waited for Erica's response before giving an opinion.

"That doesn't sound like much of a spell, but if it's basic, then maybe Herdez will let us do it." Erica finally relented.

"Well, it's not for sure. It sounds like something that we should all be able to do, but we won't know for sure until we've actually tried it. If we can all make it work, then we can work on making sure that it's up to Mrs. Herdez' standards." Lex said seriously.

"Do you want for me to get us some cups of water?" Lucia asked Erica cautiously.

"Let them do it. The little kids are supposed to fetch and carry for the older ones. It's what they're for." Erica said matter-of-factly.

"Do you have any younger brothers or sisters?" Lex asked curiously.

"Yeah. One of each. So I know what I'm talking about." Erica said confidently.

"I bet they absolutely *hate* you." Lex said simply.

"Yeah. But that's just how brothers and sisters feel about each other." Erica said dismissively.

"I'm new here, so it might not be the same for me, but I love all my brothers and my sister and I wouldn't ever wish for them to have a moment of pain or worry." Lex said honestly, then turned to Lucky and asked, "Lucky, you have a sister. What do you think?"

"She's my twin, but we're as different as two people can be. Sometimes I don't like her that much, but I always love her and I'd never want her to be hurt." Lucky said consideringly.

"What about the water?" Lucia asked seriously, trying to get the group back on task.

"Lucky? Do you think you could make some of Paul's water flames?" Lex asked curiously.

"Sure. But you can't. Isn't this for a spell that we're all going to have to do?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But this will give us a chance to try the spell out and see if we all can do it. If it doesn't work, then we haven't gone to a lot of trouble for nothing." Lex explained reasonably.

"Four?" Lucky asked to be sure.

"How about you just do one for now. I'll cast my spell on it and we'll see how that turns out, then we can decide what to do from there." Lex said decisively.

Lucky pointed at the table beside them and without any further word or deed, a ball of flame came into existence.

With the twist of his hand, the little flame metamorphosed into a plume of water.

"What the *hell* is that?" Erica gasped at the sight.

"Was that from hell?" Lex asked Lucky curiously.

"Yeah. The flame is..." Lucky reluctantly admitted, then cautiously asked, "...does it matter?"

"I guess not. I just forgot for a minute that you can do infernal magic." Lex said, then made a sign in front of the flame-shaped fountain and held it.

"*Aqua simul cum aere. Caligo ortum. Servire me.*" Lex said very precisely as he performed five distinct hand gestures.

The plume of gurgling water began to dissipate. Unexpectedly, the resulting mist retained enough coherence to be able to follow it into the air and continue to see it as being a singular shape.

"What is it?" Lucia whispered.

"I don't know. It wasn't *supposed* to be anything." Lex said honestly.

"Can you make it move?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I don't know." Lex admitted, then slowly reasoned, "The spell I used bound it to my will, so I should be able to command it. I just don't know what to tell a little cloud of fog to do."

"Can you make it move over Sydney's head?" Erica asked curiously.

"Maybe." Lex said slowly, then cautiously asked, "Who's Sydney?"

"She's the brown-haired girl by the door." Erica said seriously.

"Go ahead, little guy. Get on over there. See if you can do it." Lex said in an encouraging voice.

The little cloud seemed to condense slightly, becoming more defined, before moving in slow motion, as though it were running in mid-air.

"It's a horse." Lucky finally said in realization.

Lex looked again and decided that Lucky was right.

"It's kinda beautiful." Lucia said slowly.

"I think so too." Lex agreed.

"Are you controlling it or is it doing what you said?" Erica asked cautiously.

"I just told it what to do." Lex said honestly, then after a moment to consider, he slowly added, "If I stop paying attention to it, it will dissipate. Even though it's across the room, I could command it from here... it's connected to me by my will for it to be manifested."

"Sydney's seen it." Lucia cautioned.

The group watched as Sydney used a textbook to swat at the vague horse-shaped cloud of fog.

"Come back here now. You did good." Lex said gently, knowing that his creation could hear him.

The little cloud began a slow-motion gallop back in their direction.

Most of the class had stopped what they were doing and were watching the progress of the cloud.

"What an interesting manifestation. What have you created here?" Mrs. Herdez asked as she approached.

"I was just showing Erica and Lucia a spell that I thought that all four of us might be able to cast." Lex said seriously.

"That seems to be a rather high-level manipulation for a group project." Mrs. Herdez cautioned.

"I'm the only one who's tried it so far, but as far as I can tell, it falls mostly into 'basic' and leans a little bit into the 'air' and 'water' specialties without really requiring mastery of either." Lex said carefully.

"Would you like to go ahead and select the Nuggle as your group project?" Mrs. Herdez asked curiously.

"Can we go back and change it if we find out that one of us can't do it?" Lucia asked cautiously.

"Yes. Of course." Mrs. Herdez said, then turned her attention to the foggy little horse galloping into their midst before continuing, "This is just such an interesting manifestation that I'd like to see what you are able to do with it."

"Do you want a report with the gestures, words and everything?" Lex thought to ask.

"Yes. The girls are familiar with all the requirements. If you have any questions, they can fill you in." Mrs. Herdez assured him.

"Do I have to do a separate one or include mine in with theirs?" Lucky asked seriously.

"If your report is mostly like theirs, you may include it. If it ends up being significantly different, you may submit your own. Just do whatever seems to make the most sense." Mrs. Herdez said casually before walking away.

Lex turned back to his group and his attention was drawn by the foggy little horse, hanging in the air before him.

"You did a great job, little guy. Thank you. I release you." Lex said, then watched as the fog dispersed into nothing.

"Didn't you say the water would come back when you were finished with it?" Erica asked curiously.

"Yeah. I think that's optional. Instead of 'release' if you say 'return' when you dispel it, the water empties out of the air back to where it came from." Lex explained.

"Do we have time for me to try it?" Lucky asked hopefully.

Lex glanced at the clock, before answering, "Yeah. Go ahead."

Lucky pointed toward the table and a flame appeared.

He turned his hand and the fire became water.

While forming three hand signs in succession, Lucky carefully said, "Water and air combine. Fog rise up and serve me."

"That's not the same as what you did." Erica said slowly as she watched a recognizably different foggy horse float high into the air.

"Maybe when this is all done, we can have Nuggle races." Lex suggested to Lucky with a smile.

"We're not going to get the grade if we're not all doing the same spell." Erica said insistently.

"Lucky's magic is different. He can cast just about anyone else's spell, but he has to change it to make it work for him. Mrs. Herdez knows about it and wants for Lucky to do his projects both ways, trying to use our style of magic and then again using his own." Lex explained.

"So... what? He's like a super-witch or something?" Erica asked hesitantly.

"No. He's a mimic. He can copy other people's magic after he's seen it. The other side of that is that he can't cast a spell that he hasn't seen before." Lex carefully explained.

"Come down here. I want to see if I can change your spell to make you different." Lucky said seriously.

"Why don't you wait until we're in another class for that?" Lex cautiously suggested.

"Yeah. I've got everything I need. I can do it at home." Lucky agreed, then looked to his foggy horse and said, "You can go away now."

As expected, the little horse turned in slow motion and began to gallop away as it dissipated.

"Do we have enough time to try it?" Lucia asked anxiously.

"Yeah. If you'll go get us some water, I'll get a written version of the spell for us." Erica said decisively as she walked around the table to get her backpack.

"You doin' okay, Buddy?" Lex asked Lucky cautiously.

"Yeah. This is pretty much how I thought it would be." Lucky said honestly.

"At least you're allowed to do magic here." Lex said quietly.

"Yeah. And I'm happy about that. I just knew when I came here that not everyone was going to be nice." Lucky said honestly.

"Will you write the spell down for me so I can try and do it myself?" Erica asked as she presented Lex a spiral bound notebook.

Rather than answer aloud, Lex made a few quick hand signs over the notebook. Once that was complete, he touched the notebook with one finger and the page began to fill with writing.

"What's with you guys? Why are you so powerful?" Erica asked in astonishment.

"Pretty much anything special that we can do is because of our brothers Paul and G. If we seem powerful at all, it's because they taught us and encouraged us to be like they are." Lex said seriously.

"I just got two, you guys can make your own, right?" Lucia asked as she placed two glasses of water on the table.

"Yeah. We've already done ours. Go ahead. We don't have much time left." Lex said encouragingly.

After making sure the glass of water was placed directly in front of her, Erica began to perform the five gestures while slowly reading the text of the spell.

After a moment, she quietly said, "It's not working."

"Do you know the *equu-nonum*?" Lex cautiously asked.

"You mean that nursery rhyme about horses?" Erica asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. If you think about it, you'll see that it's a spell definition. Go ahead and recite a line from the *equu-nonum* and see if that doesn't fix it." Lex said seriously.

"Is that how *you* did it?" Erica asked with annoyance.

"No. But if I'm right, I just think it could make things turn out right." Lex explained.

"Whatever." Erica muttered before restarting her spell.

Although it couldn't be classified as a 'graceful' casting by any means, it was done competently enough that, in the end, she received the desired result.

Before Erica could react to that, Lucia began her own casting of the same spell.

While it was no more polished than Erica's had been, it also resulted in a foggy little horse rising up from their worktable.

"I guess that proves that all of us can cast the spell. Now we just have to get better at it so that we can present it for a grade." Lex said frankly.

"If you two can take care of yours, we can do ours." Erica said firmly.

"Lucky, when do we have this class again?" Lex asked cautiously.

While Lucky ruffled through his class schedules Erica said, "Tuesday."

Lex glanced at Lucky in time to see him nod his agreement.

"We can all work on our spells and compare them when we get together again." Lex said decisively.

"What makes you think that you're in charge, little boy?" Erica asked disgustedly.

Without a word, Lex began to grow until he was just a bit taller than she was.

"If you have a better idea, I'll be happy to listen to it. If not, this is a way of getting everything done and getting the grade." Lex said in his considerably more mature voice.

The bell rang before Erica could think of a way to respond.

Lex immediately shrank back down to Lucky's size and quickly asked, "What do we have next?"

After a moment of perusing the schedules, Lucky announced, "Basic magic with Mrs. Cualla."

"C'mon, I can't wait."

Chapter 10

"Mrs. Cualla, we've been assigned to your class." Lex announced as both boys approached the teacher's desk.

After a moment to consider, Mrs. Cualla cautiously said, "There must be some mistake. I'm surprised enough that students your age have been accepted to this school. But even so, if you're just starting, you should be in a first-year class."

"All I know about it is that this is where Mrs. Bright sent us." Lex said hesitantly.

"I'm afraid that this isn't going to be fair to you. Although I don't mind receiving new students mid-year, we may be too far along for you to be able to catch up."

"Well, I have the memories of someone who's already taking your class so, in a way, I *am* caught up. If you'd like, I can help Lucky... That is, if he even needs it. I've noticed that he picks up on things pretty quickly." Lex said seriously.

Mrs. Cualla held out her hand for their class schedules, then made a note on her attendance roster before handing them back.

Finally, she said, "I'm guessing that you somehow have Paul's memories and that all of this has something to do with his recent absence from my class."

"Actually, I have G's memories, but yeah, the rest is right on the nose." Lex timidly confided.

Mrs. Cualla looked to Lucky and asked, "You have no such memories to aid you?"

"No. But if someone shows me how to do a spell, I remember it. So it shouldn't take me too long to catch up." Lucky said seriously.

Mrs. Cualla was surprised by the response but finally said, "Perhaps this *is* the right class for you, after all. Lexington, would you take Lucky to the back of the room and skim through the classwork thus far with him, to give him an overview? If possible, I would like to get both of you on track with the rest of the class in the next week or so."

"Yeah. We should be able to do that." Lex easily confirmed.

"I can't do magic the same as other people." Lucky hurried to explain, then timidly added, "I thought you should know."

"You haven't noticed a talent for 'seeing' the spells cast on enchanted items, have you?" Mrs. Cualla asked carefully.

"No. I can usually see 'under' a spell when someone is casting it, but as far as I know, an enchanted item just looks like anything else to me." Lucky said honestly.

"Tell me what you see when you look at this." Mrs. Cualla said as she held up a tiny silver spider on a delicate chain.

"It's Kay's charm." Lex said happily.

"That it is. Paul and Filipe made the charm in this class." Mrs. Cualla confirmed, then continued by asking, "But what can you see when you look at it?"

"Nothing. To me, it just looks normal." Lucky said honestly.

"I can see that it's enchanted." Lex said seriously.

"Tell me what you see." Mrs. Cualla said with interest.

"It's just got the same glow as anything else that's carrying a magical charge." Lex said frankly.

"Not everyone can recognize a charmed item when they see it. This can be a very good skill to have if you're in danger of stumbling across cursed items." Mrs. Cualla said carefully.

"Yeah, well, I don't think there's much of a chance of that." Lex said with a smile at the absurdity of it.

"You're Paul and G's brothers, aren't you?" Mrs. Cualla asked in a leading tone.

"Brothers, cousins... something like that." Lex somewhat confirmed.

"Paul strikes me as someone for whom encountering both charms and curses is more of a likelihood."

"Yeah. He's easy to love... and hate." Lex said in support of her statement.

"You know, this whole thing reminds me a little too much of when Paul was first put into my class. How about, we take a different path? I think I'd like for the two of you to attempt to enchant your *own* items." Mrs. Cualla said seriously.

"G never had to do this. I wouldn't even know where to start." Lex said honestly.

"Some people look at the charms that we have, and concoct ways in which we might modify them to make them more potent or update their function for the modern age. Other people look around and identify a need, then seek to address it." Mrs. Cualla said professionally.

"So we don't have to use spells that are already written?" Lex asked to be sure.

"I have an entire classroom of people who can do that. I'd rather give you the chance to 'craft' your own spells so that you can learn basic magic from the inside, rather than just reading about it." Mrs. Cualla said seriously.

"But why don't you do that for the rest of the class?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I do, at least for those I suspect may have a talent in that direction. Those with no talent or drive would gain nothing from the endeavor and only succeed in making me, everyone around them, and themselves miserable in the process." Mrs. Cualla said frankly.

"Professor Woo said something about us making a charm, didn't he?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Yeah. He was saying that your matter construct spell might be partly managed by a charm so that a sorcerer could end up making one of his illusions feel like it's real." Lex carefully explained.

"That sounds like a rather interesting spell." Mrs. Cualla said honestly.

"Show her, Lucky." Lex said with a smile at him.

After a glance around the classroom, Lucky made a single hand sign and concentrated on releasing his spell. In the space of an instant, Lucky was suddenly standing before her, wearing his casual clothes.

"You were wearing illusionary clothing?" Mrs. Cualla asked with surprise.

"Yeah. But that's not the best part." Lex said happily, then told Lucky, "Go ahead."

Lucky spared him an annoyed glance, but then went through the short form version of creating the interlocking cylinders, then conforming them to his body. The entire process culminated with Lucky's illusionary 'sleeve' wrapping around his entire construct to make it look as plain and unremarkable as anything else in the mundane world.

"You two do the Darroch family name proud." Mrs. Cualla said appreciatively.

Lex and Lucky had matching beaming smiles at the declaration.

"I recommend that you go through your spell, step-by-step, and see if there's any way that you can contain some of it within an object. Don't worry yourselves with trying to do the whole thing, just make an aid to get a person past the... alchemical manipulation, let's say; something to allow a person with no such talent to be capable of casting the overall spell." Mrs. Cualla said carefully.

"Yeah. I can't cast the whole thing, so we could start with that, making something so that I can make an illusion uniform that feels real."

"But your illusion is just as good." Lucky said seriously.

"It's kind of a drain to have to keep feeding it magic and besides, it doesn't do the main thing that clothes are supposed to do; it doesn't keep me warm." Lex said frankly.

"I didn't think of that." Lucky said honestly.

"Sometimes it's nice to have a layer of protection against simple mundane things like a spray of water or dirt being kicked up by something. Being able to create a jacket or a coat when I need one might be a really good trick to have handy." Lex explained seriously.

"When you're ready to begin, I suggest that you look through the library and explore a few of the charmed items that we have lying about and see if you're inspired by their design in how to create one of your own." Mrs. Cualla carefully suggested.

"If it ends up that we can't make a charm, are you going to put us in with the regular class?" Lex asked curiously.

"Perhaps. Before that time, I hope to have a chance to evaluate you for your knowledge and aptitude in basic magic. We'll see how things go from there."

"What is everyone else doing?" Lucky asked as he looked around the classroom at all the students, each with a handheld mirror somewhere on their desk.

"At the moment we're exploring traditional death rituals and the associated charms. I wouldn't worry too much about that, as long as you take a moment to read

through the chapter overview, you can probably answer any question I'd be likely to ask on the subject." Mrs. Cualla said seriously.

"Okay. And just in case, we'll be sure to review the chapters before it; there aren't really that many." Lex said seriously.

"Excellent. If you will go to the back table and begin your investigation, I'll bring you some textbooks shortly." Mrs. Cualla said warmly.

"Thank you Ma'am." Lex said respectfully.

* * * * *

Once they had their books, Lex decided that Lucky would be best served by spending a little time getting familiar with the textbook from the previous year.

The overview of charms and curses turned out to be interesting to Lucky and there were a few spells that he could see the value in learning by virtue of their utility.

While Lucky was reading, Lex approached with a talisman in his hand.

"What does that one do?" Lucky asked when he noticed.

"This? It wards off werewolves specifically and canines in general." Lex said quietly as he took a seat at the table.

"How can we use that for our uniform illusion spell?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"We can't." Lex admitted, then explained, "I remember my mom... I mean, G's mom, having a talisman like this one. I don't know why she was worried about werewolves, but she wore it all the time. G always thought it might have something to do with Uncle Gawain."

"If not having a mom of your own bothers you I can understand and stuff, if you need me to." Lucky awkwardly offered.

"I usually don't even think about it. I just saw this thing on the shelf back there and remembered her and her charms... that was her big magic, she had dozens and dozens of charms." Lex said distantly.

"Did you find anything to help us with our charm?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"I found a cuff that would probably work really well. If we could enchant it with the base construct spell, then the witch would only have to know the illusion to make it look real." Lex said thoughtfully.

"Would they have to know the 'changey' or would we enchant that on there, too?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I couldn't put it on the cuff. I know that much. But if we were to find some kind of a stone that we could mount on the cuff, we could enchant the stone separately. As long as the person using it activated them in order, it should work." Lex said thoughtfully.

"What would happen if they did it backward?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"A magical wedgie, maybe? I don't know. It would 'changey' their real clothes and their 'constructed' clothes would be in their unaltered state." Lex said slowly.

"There should be a way that we can make it work the way it's supposed to every time." Lucky said seriously.

"Enchant the cuff, enchant the stone, then enchant the cuff *and* the stone to only perform one action, one way." Lex said consideringly.

"So that would make it so that you would always get it to do the uniform in the right order every time, but if you ever wanted to use it for a coat or something else, you'd have to completely kill all three charms and you'd probably end up destroying the whole thing before you could remake it the way you wanted it to be." Lucky said slowly as he reasoned it out.

"We also have to fuel it." Lex reminded him.

"Yeah. And we'd also have to put a limiter on it so that it wouldn't completely drain someone who had only a little magic to start with. If we didn't do that, it could hurt them." Lucky said frankly.

"If we make it so that only a witch of a certain level can use it, then we can power it from the witches personal reserve of magic." Lex said slowly.

"Yeah. But everything I'm reading about charms in here is about what they do and how they do it. The book doesn't say anything about how to *make* a charm." Lucky said honestly.

"I remember Paul telling G about that. Him and Filipe were able to figure out how to make their own charms by combining their abilities. But I don't think he ever said where he found out how to do that." Lex said slowly as he fought to remember.

"Paul takes things that already are and makes them do something new, he makes them do what he wants them to." Lucky said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Okay. Paul can see inside spells and reconstruct them to do what he wants. *You* can reinterpret spells and mix them together using your own magic. If we can take your version of the spell and enchant an item with it, that should do it." Lex said carefully.

"How do we enchant an item?" Lucky asked simply.

"That's the big question, isn't it?" Lex asked in return.

"The answer's not in these textbooks, is it?" Lucky asked seriously.

"Not the answer to this, but a lot of other answers to a lot of other questions *are* in those books. And some of those answers are the ones on the tests that we'll have to take." Lex said frankly.

"So how are we going to do this?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"You keep on reading those textbooks, so you can get a good grip on how basic magic and charms work while I search the reference books and hopefully find a 'how to' guide on how to enchant an object."

Lucky didn't appear to be too happy with the arrangement.

"And if I can't find the answer by the end of class, we can ask Paul at lunch. He's already done this and knows where to find *exactly* what we're looking for." Lex said confidently.

"Are you sure?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"I personally saw Paul enchant a pendant for a mundane person... well, G saw him, but you know what I mean." Lex finished with a smile.

Lucky nodded for him to continue.

"Not only did he embed a spell within the pendant, but then he actually fueled it with the energy from a battery. He used several spell diagrams, and I can't even

guess at how many magical disciplines, but in the end he had created an enchanted item." Lex said seriously.

"Yeah. That sounds like what we need. But I'd still feel better if we could do it without Paul's help. If he was able to find the answer, then we should be able to find it too." Lucky said honestly.

"I'll see what I can do to find us copies of those spell diagrams that Paul used. I have a feeling that that's the key to finding enough clues so that we can enchant our own items." Lex said speculatively.

"Yeah. While you're doing that, I'll get back to reading this. I'm not sure if it'll help us with making our own charms, but I'll probably need to know this stuff anyway, like on a test or something." Lucky said decisively.

"Even if you don't need to know it for a test, it won't hurt for you to have a good idea of what other kinds of charms there are and how they work. It might even give you an idea for the charm that we're trying to make." Lex agreed.

Lucky turned his attention back to his textbook with renewed dedication.

Seeing that, Lex returned to the shelves of books to try and locate something to aid them in their cause.

* * * * *

"How's it going?" Lex gently asked, not wanting to startle Lucky, who seemed to be absorbed in his reading.

"I don't think I've found anything that has to do with making a regular thing into a charm, but I'm almost seeing patterns in which things are charmed to do what spells. I don't know if that'll help us or not." Lucky said seriously.

"I don't know either, but I doubt that it'll hurt." Lex said honestly, then continued, "The bell's about to ring, if you want to get your stuff put away."

"Can I take these books, or do I have to leave them here?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Those are textbooks, so you can take them if you want to. I'd ask Mrs. Cualla before taking any of the reference books." Lex assured him.

"Yeah. If we find out how to make a charm, I might go back and try to make a few of these. Some of them look like they'd be good to have." Lucky said honestly.

"Just remember that shortcuts and easy answers can end up backfiring on you. Before you go to a lot of trouble making a charm, be sure that it's something that you really want and will actually be more useful than doing without it." Lex said sagely.

Before Lucky could respond, the bell rang, signaling the beginning of lunchtime.

* * * * *

"Do you remember Curtis from the cookout?" Lex asked as they walked out of the classroom.

"Yeah. I don't think I got to talk to him much, but I know who you're talking about." Lucky said slowly.

"He sits with us at lunch. He's not a witch, so we don't talk about magic when he's around." Lex said seriously.

"Oh? I bet that makes things weird." Lucky said slowly as he thought about the connotations of that.

"Sometimes. It's not bad though. Curtis is a fun guy, so no one minds holding back a little if it means that he can hang out with us." Lex explained.

"Okay. I'll remember." Lucky promised, then thought to add, "As long as you remember that you haven't met him before."

"What?" Lex asked with surprise.

"G's the one who knows him. When you meet him, remember that you're strangers." Lucky said seriously.

"Yeah. I didn't think of that." Lex said slowly, then noticed where they were and quickly said, "Real world."

"Huh?" Lucky asked in confusion at the unusual statement.

"Up ahead we'll be entering the regular school. From here on there might be mundane people who can hear us, so we can't talk about magic and stuff." Lex explained.

"It was like that at my old school, even though just about everyone there was a witch." Lucky said honestly.

"There's probably more mundane people than witches here, so you've got to be careful..." Lex trailed off with a smile when he saw Paul, G, Nazzy and Vinda waiting for them at the 'real world' crossroads.

* * * * *

"How are you guys doing?" Paul asked as he automatically walked to Lucky and gave him a firm hug.

"I think everything's pretty much like we expected." Lex said cautiously.

"Introductions?" Vinda firmly prompted.

"Don't act like I didn't already tell you." Paul said with a laugh, then continued, "Lex and Lucky, this is Nazzy and Vinda."

"I met you at the cookout." Lucky said simply.

"I didn't." Lex added with a smile.

"It's nice to meet everyone again or for the first time. Now can we eat?" Nazzy asked hopefully.

"Leave it to Nazz to cut right through the formality." G laughed with delight.

"I think they're having those huge fish steak things that I like so much, so I'm with Nazzy. Let's go." Paul said seriously.

"Haddock." G supplied with an affectionate grin.

"Whatever, they're awesome." Paul said as he joined Nazzy in the race toward the cafeteria.

"We'll talk at the table." Vinda quietly assured them before hurrying with G to follow.

"I thought they'd be asking us a lot of questions about how our day went." Lucky said honestly.

"They can see that we passed the entry exam and that we haven't been scared away yet. So those are the biggest questions already answered." Lex said frankly, then added, "I'm sure that they'll remember that we exist about two seconds after food hits their bellies."

"If this fish isn't really, REALLY good, my feelings are going to be seriously hurt." Lucky muttered as he followed Lex into the lunch line.

* * * * *

"Well?" Lex asked with a smile of anticipation.

Lucky finished chewing his bite of food and swallowed before saying, "Okay. Yeah. It's *that* good."

"Where have you guys been?" Curtis asked as he approached their table.

"History." Paul said simply.

"Creative writing." G said with a grimace.

"No. You were gone for a week and then all of a sudden you're back? Where have you been?" Curtis asked as he sat down in the next available seat.

"You know that field trip you went on to the courthouse? It was something like that. I think they called it a work-study." Paul said seriously.

"But where were you? What were you doing?" Curtis asked before taking a large bite of his fish.

"It was like a charity thing. We're not supposed to talk about it." Paul said reluctantly.

"Yeah. If it got out that these people were vulnerable, it would undo what we did to help them. They'd end up regretting that they ever met us." G said ruefully.

"So the school took you on a field trip to build houses or deliver blankets or something. And they're doing it just because it's a good thing to do. They don't even want any credit for it?" Curtis asked in amazement.

"I think they also wanted to teach us a lesson." Paul said frankly, then explained, "Now I know, without a doubt, that *we* have the ability to make a difference. I'm not going to trust that some celebrity or politician somewhere is going to step up and fix what's wrong. If I find out that someone needs our help, I know that *we* can help them."

"Okay. I understand what you're saying, and I think it sounds great. The only thing I don't get is how the new guys figure into it." Curtis said frankly as he turned his attention to Lex and Lucky.

"Cousins. You met Lucky at the cookout. Next to him is our cousin Lex. They showed up while we were on the work-study. Their schools were crap so they came here to get a decent education." Paul said seriously.

"Okay. *That* I can totally buy. The longer I'm here the more grateful I am to be away from my last school." Curtis said honestly.

"I've never been to another school, but from what I've heard from you and Paul, it sounds like we've got it pretty good here." G said seriously.

"Yeah. It's like the difference between day and night." Curtis replied to G, then turned his attention to Lucky and said, "It's nice to see you again Lucky, I remember you from the train."

"That's right. Uncle D let me blow the whistle." Lucky said happily.

Curtis smiled at the memory, then turned and said, "It's nice to meet you Lex. I know how it is to be new here. Just give it a chance and let me know if you need any help with anything."

"Paul and G have done a pretty good job of paving the way for us and raising the bar really high." Lex said with a grin at Paul.

"I like it up there." Paul said in his defense.

"By the way, where is everyone else?" Curtis asked as he looked toward the service line to see if any of their friends were there.

"I don't think Dex and Filipe are here today." Paul said honestly, then looked around to see if anyone knew anything more.

Finally, it was G who said, "I guess they were too tired after the work-study and decided to take the day off to rest. They were both there with us."

"Yeah. That's what I would have done if Dad would have let us." Paul said frankly.

"What about Karras? Was he on your work-study too?" Curtis asked curiously.

"No. He's here today. I had a class with him. I think he's having lunch with Charles." Paul said simply, then pointed across the dining room as he said, "There they are."

"Do you know if Corabeth is here today?" Lex asked Paul curiously.

"I haven't seen her, but I'm not in the habit of keeping track of her either. If she's here, she'll be in my next class. Did you want for me to give her a message from you?" Paul asked with a smile.

After a moment to consider, Lex shook his head as he said, "Just let her know that I'm here."

"Who's Corabeth?" Curtis asked cautiously.

"A girl in my class. Lex met her outside of school and they seemed to get along pretty well. That was before we knew that Lex would be coming here." Paul said simply.

"Did you have any problems getting scheduled? I know that you two being so young must have made things more difficult." G asked seriously.

"It wasn't too bad. Pretty much what I expected, except that we got second year English. I figured we'd automatically be in first year everything." Lex said honestly.

"Do you think that you'll do alright in that class?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. I've had most of that stuff already and Lucky is picking it up pretty quickly." Lex said consideringly.

"Then it sounds like they put you in the class that you needed to be in, instead of automatically putting you with your age group." Paul said seriously.

"They did that to me too." Curtis said between bites of food.

"How's that?" Vinda asked with interest.

"Instead of keeping me with my class group in math, they moved me ahead to where the work was more of a challenge for me. Even though it's more difficult, it's totally worth it not to be bored out of my mind in class every day." Curtis explained.

"I wonder what happens when you finish their most advanced math class and you've still got a year or two to go." G said speculatively.

"We've already talked about that. Starting next year, I'll be taking college level classes for the subjects that I've maxed out. I'll get actual college credit toward whatever degree I end up going for." Curtis said happily.

"So does that mean that after lunch each day you're going to have to hurry over to the college?" Vinda asked curiously.

"I don't know yet. They may just decide to bring a college teacher here. I guess it depends on how many of us there are that blow the bell curve." Curtis finished with a smile.

"Hopefully you'll still be able to have lunch with us. I want to know how things are going with you." Vinda said with a smile at him.

"I'll make sure that I can. Besides, I don't want to have to give up this wonderful food for college cafeteria cardboard." Curtis said frankly.

"We'd better hurry and finish up. Lunch is almost over, and I don't want to waste a bite of this." Paul said seriously before taking a large bite of his fish.

The others followed his lead, none of them wanting to miss out on the exceptional meal.

* * * * *

Once the group were safely ensconced in the magical hallway, Vinda quickly asked, "Are you really G's self-portrait?"

"I was. Now I'm myself." Lex cautiously answered.

"When G told us about you, I couldn't believe it." Nazzy said frankly.

Lex let go of his 'Cousin Lex' form and grew to his full height.

"Can you believe it now?" Lex asked with a classic 'G' grin.

After a moment of staring, Nazzy cautiously said, "When you put it that way... yeah."

"So you get volunteered to go on a work-study project and you come back with a sentient copy of yourself? What did you do?" Vinda asked in amazement.

"You know how it is with stuff like this. We can't tell you anything, but I hope that you'll help Lex and Lucky try to fit in anyway." G said frankly.

"Lex, you'd better change back before too many people see you." Paul quietly suggested.

"Yeah." Lex said as he shrank back down to his 'Cousin Lex' form.

"Is he a chameleon?" Nazzy slowly asked.

"No. But that'd be cool, wouldn't it?" G finished with a smile.

"I was originally created using sorcery, so illusions work a lot better on me than most people." Lex explained.

"But crafting takes just as long for him as it does for me. A chameleon can look at someone and copy them on the spot, it'll take Lex a couple days to get a person's look down and I don't even know if he could manage a specific voice." G quickly added.

"Whatever you guys went for must've been crazy. When my dad got home he was completely wrecked. I don't think I've ever seen him so tired." Nazzy said seriously.

"He's not the only one. I feel like I could fall asleep right here and now." Paul said frankly.

"Are you guys still going to Sorcery with me?" G quickly asked Lex and Lucky.

"Yeah. We already talked to Professor Woo about it." Lex said seriously.

"And he knows about me and Lex, so you don't have to worry as much about what you say around him." Lucky helpfully added.

"He's the senior professor, I usually don't see him more than a couple times a month. With all the students he has, he may not even remember who I am." G said honestly.

"He knows who you are." Lex said with certainty, then added, "He even remembered who *I* am."

"You've got to tell us all about it later. We've got to go." Paul said regretfully.

"Lucky?" A voice cautiously asked from behind them.

"Karras?" Lucky strained to remember.

"What are you doing here?" Karras asked as he joined the group.

"I just started going to school here. This is my first day. I've got to go to Sorcery class right now. I'll talk to you about it later." Lucky said quickly.

"Yeah. Later. It's good to see you again." Karras said with a smile before hurrying away with the others.

G, Lex and Lucky turned in the opposite direction and moved at a deliberate pace to get to their next class before the tardy bell rang.

Chapter 11

"You're still working on that Hindu mythology thing, right?" Lex asked as they walked.

"Yes. But meeting Linnaeus has given me some ideas about how to rig it to move more naturally." G said seriously.

"What are *we* going to have to do?" Lucky asked anxiously.

"Meet our teacher and see what they want us to do." Lex said frankly.

"Isn't Professor Woo our teacher?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"No. He's our teacher's teacher... or maybe our teacher's teacher's teacher. I really don't know how deep it goes. All I know is that Professor Woo is in charge of the department and he makes sure that the teachers working under him are doing their jobs right and teaching the students what they need to learn." Lex explained seriously.

"What do you think our teacher will have us do?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Honestly, the first day or two, with us looking this age, they'll probably want to test us to see how much we already know and how powerful we are." Lex said frankly.

"Should I show them Zah Zah?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think Zah Zah will give them a pretty good idea of what you're capable of." Lex said seriously.

"If you *really* want to learn Sorcery, then you need to let your teacher know what you can do. They don't have to know *everything* about you, but they need to know what power you have and how experienced you are with it." G helpfully added.

"I'm not used to having to decide who I can trust or how much. My mom always did all of that for me." Lucky said honestly.

"She sounds like a good mom, like she did a good job. She kept you safe so that you could be here now, ready to take over making decisions for yourself." Lex said firmly.

"And if you're ever in doubt about what's right, you've got lots of people who you can talk things over with. Just don't think that anyone is going to take over making

the decisions for you. We'll help to explain how different things work and maybe let you in on some things that you haven't heard of, but in the end, you'll decide what's going to happen to you next." G said seriously.

"That's right. I'm going to be getting my own things sorted out. You figure out what you want and you can ask my opinion if you're interested in what I think about your choice." Lex said frankly.

"Okay." Lucky said nervously.

"I'm glad that's settled, because we're here." G said as he led the way into the Sorcery classroom.

* * * * *

"It looks like a regular room." Lucky said slowly as he looked around.

"Yeah. When I first started here, I was expecting something really mysterious and witchy, but there isn't much around here that would tip anyone off that it wasn't a regular classroom if they got in here somehow and snooped around." G said frankly.

"It's warded against that, isn't it?" Lex asked curiously.

"Yeah. As far as I know. Paul really knows more about that stuff than I do. But if someone from outside the witch community... or from outside 'our' witch community were to get in here, I don't know if we have anything to defend against it." G said frankly.

"I don't remember you thinking about stuff like this before." Lex said honestly.

"Yeah. I just thought about it since the work-study. Looking at those barriers made me think about the ones we live with every day." G said honestly.

"What's up G? Who are your new friends?" A boy asked as he approached.

"Relatives. Tauru, these are my cousins Lex and Lucky. They're starting here today. Guys, this is Tauru, my sometimes partner in Sorcery." G said in introduction.

"What's a 'sometimes' partner?" Lucky cautiously asked.

"We get teamed up together a lot." G said simply.

"Yeah. Our powers mesh up pretty good, so we work well together." Tauru said casually.

"Professor Woo should be here any minute. Help me keep an eye out for him." Lex quietly told Lucky.

"So, how did your mysterious project turn out? I heard that they nabbed a few of the Wizardry students for it too." Tauru asked G curiously.

"We went, did what we were told to, and got the job done." G said simply.

"I don't know why I always think these things are going to be more exciting than they are." Tauru said frankly.

"From what I've heard, excitement is what you *don't* want when you go on a work-study." G said seriously.

"Yeah. Probably not." Tauru agreed.

"There he is." Lucky said quietly.

"We've got to go check in. We'll see you guys later." Lex said before leading Lucky away.

"Cousins?" Tauru asked as the pair of younger teens walked away.

"Yeah." G confirmed.

"They look it."

* * * * *

"We made it." Lucky said happily as they approached Professor Woo.

"Were you expecting not to?" Professor Woo asked with a reluctant smile.

"There were a couple times in Spelling where I wasn't too sure." Lucky said frankly.

"Not everyone wants to have a new person on their team." Lex quietly explained.

"I can't say that you won't encounter the same thing in here, but from what I've already seen of you, I have no doubt that you'll make friends in no time."

"Well, we're ready to get started when you are." Lex said confidently.

"Come with me." Professor Woo said, then led the way to a group of teachers at the side of the room.

* * * * *

"Mr. Howlen, I'd like to introduce you to our visitors from the Witchcraft discipline, Lexington and Lucky Darroch." Professor Woo said somewhat formally.

"Do they have any talent for sorcery, or are they just tourists?" Mr. Howlen asked cautiously.

"Do you want to show him?" Professor Woo asked with a smile.

"Lucky, why don't you show off Zah Zah?" Lex cautiously suggested.

"But she's not an illusion." Lucky said uncertainly.

"No. But she's covered with one... and it's really impressive. You did a great job on it, you should show it off." Lex said seriously.

Lucky undid a button on the belly of his jacket and the tiny kitten appeared to climb out, as though she had been curled up, resting inside of Lucky until she was needed.

Mr. Howlen and Professor Woo watched as the tiny cat-like creature scrabbled and worked its way up Lucky's arm until it came to rest on his shoulder.

"What are we seeing here?" Mr. Howlen finally asked as Lucky buttoned his jacket.

"Based on what I saw earlier, I'd hate to imagine." Professor Woo responded warily.

"Hold on a second. Lucky can't be the only one showing off." Lex said as he stepped away from Lucky's side.

"Lucky, will you give me a hand with this?" Lex asked as a small fireball appeared in Lex's palm.

It only took a moment for Lucky to catch on. He pointed at the fireball in Lex's hand, then turned his hand sideways.

As he did, the flame transformed into a gurgling little fountain of water.

"Thanks." Lex said happily as he released the plume of water to float into the air before him.

Very deliberately, he then made the five symbols of his spell as he internally incanted the portion of the spell that he typically spoke.

As Professor Woo and Mr. Howlen watched, the water dispersed into a light fog as it lifted into the air.

"That's not Sorcery." Lucky warned him.

"Not yet." Lex said with a grin, then began performing a high-level illusion that caught all who were watching off guard.

"Wait. You can't do that..." Mr. Howlen began to say, but the words caught in his throat as Lex began to encase his foggy little nuggle in a very precise and detailed illusion.

"You used mist as a framework upon which to suspend an illusion." Professor Woo said slowly as he interpreted what he was seeing.

"Yeah. Well, I can't let Lucky have all the fun." Lex said as his hands came to rest and he focused on his completed work.

The little horse was astounding in its complexity. The dark mane was reminiscent of Lex's own hair and the gray coat was similar to that of Lex's unicorn form.

"That's... you've created a fully animated miniature horse with a spell cast in under a minute." Mr. Howlen finally said in amazement.

"Yeah. Well, I cheated a little." Lex shyly admitted.

"The difference between working smart and cheating is sometimes nothing more than differing points of view." Professor Woo said frankly.

"Come over here, Boy. Stand on my shoulder like Zah Zah does for Lucky." Lex said to the tiny horse who was galloping away from him in slow motion.

"There's no way you could have rigged and animated an illusion in that short of a casting." Mr. Howlen declared.

"That's why it's significant that he suspended the illusion on the framework of a nuggle. It's actually quite ingenious. The nuggle has the absolute minimum of physical substance upon which to enact an illusion. Likewise, the nuggle has its own properties, that being the ability to move independently and respond to rudimentary commands." Professor Woo explained.

"I see what you're saying, but I still don't know where the 'nuggle' came from. The spell used to summon or create it didn't appear to have any definition." Mr. Howlen said in a puzzled voice.

"That's where I cheated." Lex said frankly.

"How would that be?" Professor Woo asked with genuine interest.

"My original casting of the spell left the definition out, because I expected an undefined cloud of mist. All I can figure is that the nuggle was brought into being as a manifestation of my animal transformation." Lex said seriously.

"Like summons like." Professor Woo said with a knowing nod.

"Right. And then, when Lucky summoned his nuggle, he had mine to look at as an example *and* he had the advantage of *also* having a horse animal form to draw upon." Lex explained.

Taking that as a prompt, Lucky created a fireball, turned it to water, made three signs, then gestured as his water flame became a faint ghostly horse made of mist.

"After that, our other teammates made two more nuggles. They failed at first, but after including the *equu-nonum* in the objective phase, they made theirs take on a similar shape to ours." Lex said, then reached to his shoulder and ever so gently petted the tiny horse.

"Are you going to keep him?" Lucky asked curiously.

"Yeah. I think so. Paul has Ginh Zah, G has Mah Zah, you have Zah Zah, so I think I'll go ahead and keep Zephyr." Lex said warmly.

"You're going to need to learn to do the water spell for yourself, so you won't need me to do it for you." Lucky said seriously.

"Remind me later and I'll get you to show me how *you* do it. I don't think I could do it Paul's way, but I might be able to manage yours." Lex said honestly.

"So are these examples of your Sorcery abilities?" Mr. Howlen asked cautiously.

"Yes and no." Lex said honestly, then explained, "This isn't all sorcery, but everything has some sorcery in it. Maybe that's the most honest way we can tell you about who we are. We're not just the one thing."

"I can see the sorcery at work on your nuggle and I acknowledge the skill in your crafting. I'm not as sure of what I'm seeing when it comes to the cat." Mr. Howlen said honestly.

"Show him, Zah Zah." Lucky said as he took her down off his shoulder and kept firm hold of Zah Zah's lower torso.

At that, Zah Zah seemed to explode, lunging directly toward Mr. Howlen.

Both he and Professor Woo backed away several steps as the inky scribbled horror hissed and clawed in their direction.

"I think she doesn't like being in front of people. It makes her angry." Lucky quietly explained.

"What the hell is that?" Mr. Howlen squeaked.

"No. I didn't put any hell powers in her at all. I didn't know how to when I first made her. Zah Zah is mostly basic." Lucky explained.

"What you're seeing now, that's what Zah Zah actually looks like from her earliest version. The pretty little kitten thing... that's Lucky's sorcery covering her." Lex said frankly.

"That was a beautifully crafted spell. Although I suspected that the cat was somehow an illusion, I had no idea what type of caustic horror it was masking." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

"Come back now, Zah Zah. Get back in your skin and I'll let you stay out for a while." Lucky said in a coaxing voice.

The too human eyes looked around distrustingly for a moment, then the cat-beast began to withdraw into the tube of kitten fur that Lucky was still holding.

Lex turned his head and focused on Zephyr before saying, "Don't get any ideas."

The little horse bobbed his head once, possibly in agreement.

"Good boy." Lex said with a gentle smile.

* * * * *

"So, Mr. Howlen, do you think you have anything to teach these boys?" Professor Woo asked knowingly.

"From the look of it, they *might* have something to teach *me*." Mr. Howlen said with a chuckle.

"Yes. I can easily foresee a circumstance where things could work out that way." Professor Woo said frankly.

"But, while they appear to have considerable skill, I would like very much to expose them to some of the other, lesser known, disciplines of Sorcery, if only so that they can have a chance to consider them before their visit with us is concluded." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

"So you won't have us doing the same thing as everyone else?" Lex asked cautiously.

"If you have an interest in creating and rigging an illusion in preparation for animation, then I will be happy to cover that with you. However, I get the feeling that the two of you have *other* questions. If I may, I'd like an opportunity to help you discover what those questions are and possibly guide you to find the answers." Mr. Howlen said intently.

"Yeah. That sounds like what we need to be doing." Lex quietly agreed.

"Don't you want to?" Lucky hesitantly asked.

"Sometimes you have to decide between what you want to do and what you *should* do. When you do what you should, there's sometimes this feeling like the trap snapping shut on you... I just felt that." Lex said frankly.

"So, did you not want to do sorcery?" Lucky asked confusedly.

"Yeah. I really do. But we've just decided something really big, and a few years from now, we're probably going to look back on this exact moment as something that completely changed our lives." Lex said seriously.

"Maybe. But I don't care too much about that." Lucky said honestly, surprising all present.

Before any of them could ask, Lucky continued, "I don't exist in tomorrow or yesterday, so I try not to think too much about them. Right now is all I have and all

that I can change, so I have to do the best that I can with what I've got right in front of me."

"You're going to have to think about the future at some point. Otherwise you won't be properly prepared for things when the time comes." Professor Woo cautioned.

"I'll do what I have to, but I still don't like thinking about it." Lucky said honestly.

"I can't think of anyone with a better handle on the future than Dad. So I'm not going to worry. I trust that Lucky and Dad will work it out." Lex said assuredly.

"Excuse me, Professor Woo?" A female voice timidly interrupted.

"Hi, Indra! How is everything?" Lucky asked happily.

"It's fine, Lucky. How are you?" Indra asked warmly.

"I think everything is turning out the best that it can be." Lucky said with a smile.

"What can I do for you today, Miss Boheme?" Professor Woo asked respectfully.

"Dr. Williams needs to see Gwayne Darroch for his post work-study evaluation." Indra said simply.

"I believe I see him near the window with young Mr. Montenegro." Professor Woo said seriously.

"This shouldn't take too long. As I understand it, there are just a few lingering questions that really need to be resolved before the entire incident can be counted as closed." Indra said seriously.

Professor Woo looked concerned at the statement.

"Remember where I came from." Lex said simply.

Professor Woo nodded, as he watched Indra make her way across the classroom to where G and Tauru were quietly talking.

After a moment of discussion, Indra led G back across the classroom, then out the door.

"So, is everyone happy with the arrangements that we have made for your sorcery education?" Professor Woo asked seriously.

After a moment to consider, Lex finally said, "Yeah. I am."

"Me too." Lucky immediately chimed in.

"I look at this as an adventure. I became a teacher in hopes of having experiences such as this." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

"Good. If *any* of you realize that things aren't working out to your satisfaction, be sure to contact me so that we can reevaluate and give this project of ours every opportunity to succeed." Professor Woo said seriously.

* * * * *

Mr. Howlen led the boys to an empty spot where they could speak more or less privately.

"So, what are we going to do first?" Lex asked curiously.

"I think that before we get into anything too intensive, maybe we should touch on the projects the rest of the class have already completed. That will just give us a sense of where you are in comparison."

"Which projects?" Lex asked cautiously.

"If you already have any animals crafted, you could show us one of those." Mr. Howlen said simply.

"What about..." Lex asked as he pointed at the little horse standing on his shoulder.

"As impressive as that is, I would like to see an example of your ability to cast a standard illusion, not one masking an existing physical form." Mr. Howlen explained.

"I can do a hedgehog or an otter, if you want." Lex said cautiously.

"Yes. Whichever you prefer." Mr. Howlen said easily.

"Lucky, do you want to do it with me?" Lex asked with a smile.

"Yeah!" Lucky said happily.

Lex moved so that he was facing Lucky, affording him the best possible view.

Mr. Howlen watched as the boys began to cast their 'standard' illusion, slowly at first, but with increasing ease as they exactly mirrored each other's movements.

Both boys seemed to be enthralled in the spellcasting, not only casting their spells confidently, but almost joyfully.

When the pair finally stopped, two otters faded into being, one beside each of the boys.

"If there were a synchronized spellcasting competition, I'm pretty sure you guys would walk away with it." Mr. Howlen said, sounding to be impressed.

"I think we'd have an unfair advantage in a competition like that. Lucky's a magic mimic." Lex said as he knelt down to look at his newly created otter.

"Do you mean that I'd have an unfair advantage like tall people have an unfair advantage at basketball?" Lucky asked curiously.

Lex was surprised by the question, but cautiously responded, "Magical advantage shouldn't be used to win competitions. I guess if you were going to go up against another mimic, then it might be a fair fight but it wouldn't be right for you to benefit from something that you didn't earn." Lex said seriously.

"Well, I wasn't going to, but I don't think it's wrong to take what you were born with and make the most that you can out of it." Lucky said reasonably.

"Maybe it's one of those things that should be done in moderation. Take the advantage when it's for something good, but let someone else take the win sometimes, just to be a good sport about it." Lex said consideringly.

"Yeah. I guess if I go up against a sick orphan that I can throw it if it'll make him feel better about himself." Lucky said with a playful grin.

"You know, the people around here are probably going to underestimate you." Lex said frankly.

"Yeah, I know." Lucky said with a smile as he petted Zah Zah on his shoulder.

"Good job on the illusions. Neither one of you happen to have created a self-portrait, have you?" Mr. Howlen asked cautiously.

"I think I could probably manage one if I *had* to." Lex said with a smile.

"I probably can't." Lucky said seriously.

"Sure you can. I've already got yours mostly crafted. Remember the recipe that I use..." Lex said frankly.

"If you need time to prepare, we can do something else." Mr. Howlen offered.

"No. We've got this." Lex said confidently, then cast the ultra-short, ultra-compacted version of the 'Cousin Lex' definition spell that was rapidly becoming his dominant identity.

To the practiced eye, the grace and elegance of his spellcasting spoke of carefully honed skill at manipulating forces with intense precision.

"Very nice. I believe you could give G a run for his money, since he's the undisputed class champion in illusionary self portraits." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

"I won't take that away from him." Lex said as he waved his arm and dispelled his self-portrait.

"I didn't mean to suggest that you would." Mr. Howlen hurried to assure him.

"Can you help me make mine?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Standard definition. Do it with me." Lex said as he began to go through the longer form version of casting an illusion.

Mr. Howlen watched and appreciated the strength and confidence Lex exuded as he led Lucky through the long and complicated spellcasting.

Lucky, for his part, kept up with Lex's expert level of spellcasting every step of the way. He didn't stumble on any of the words, the gestures were performed confidently and expertly in every detail. If he didn't know that Lucky was seeing the spell for the first time, he would be ready to swear that the two of them had practiced their parallel spellcasting multiple times in preparation for their display.

When the pair finally stopped all movement, there were three versions of Lucky standing around Lex.

"That's astounding. This level of casting is what senior sorcerers get paid to do professionally." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

"Then I hope that G is ready to earn some money, because I don't plan on doing this any more than I have to." Lex said darkly as he dispelled his casting of 'Lucky'.

He felt something wet on his ear and turned his head suddenly.

The tiny horse on his shoulder was looking back at him, not quite wearing an expression, but Lex nonetheless assigned it a meaning.

"I'm not going to stop casting you, Zephyr. I just don't plan on casting illusions professionally." Lex gently explained.

"How's my copy of me? Is it good enough?" Lucky asked Mr. Howlen hopefully.

"The quality is superb, but since you didn't cast it by yourself, I don't know if it can be counted as a fair representation of your skill and ability." Mr. Howlen said carefully.

"I can't make something out of nothing. I have to have something to start with." Lucky fought to explain.

"Why don't you dispel this and recast your self-portrait your own way, then it will be one hundred percent your skill and your magic being used." Lex suggested seriously.

"Yeah. Okay." Lucky said determinedly as he followed Lex's example and waved his arm as he dispelled his previous casting.

"I don't understand..." Mr. Howlen said slowly.

"Just watch." Lex said seriously, then stepped aside so that Lucky could be the entire focus.

* * * * *

The first thing that caught Mr. Howlen's attention was that Lucky wasn't using a standard spell, either in spoken or gestural terms.

The next thing he noticed was that Lucky didn't appear to be using sorcery at all. In fact, he didn't appear to be using any form of magic that Mr. Howlen had ever seen or even heard of.

The spell was slightly longer than when Lucky and Lex had cast together, but it was the completely foreign style of spellcasting that was most perplexing.

In a grand crescendo of movement, Lucky finally finished his spell as his creation took form before them.

"What is it?" Mr. Howlen cautiously asked as he looked at the illusionary construct.

"It's mostly the same as what I made when I was casting with Lex. This is just made a different way." Lucky explained.

"This is what Lucky's magic really is. He has the ability to copy my magic and cast the same spell that I'm casting when I'm casting it. But when he tries to cast it again on his own, he casts it using his own kind of magic that no one else has." Lex said seriously.

"Or maybe it's what everyone else has. Remember, Paul can cast my spells too." Lucky cautioned.

"Yeah, but Paul is the exception to a lot of rules. I'm going to wait until we have a few more things settled before I start thinking that we've figured it all out." Lex said seriously.

"Regardless, it looks as though you are both capable of performing at the level of the rest of the class." Mr. Howlen said confidently.

"I was actually hoping we could do a little better than that." Lex said honestly.

"Don't worry. We're getting there. I just wanted to make a point of establishing that the two of you won't be missing out on anything if you depart from the standard course of study. You've already achieved their level of mastery." Mr. Howlen explained.

"Now you're talking." Lex said with a smile.

"What are we going to be doing?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"I don't know yet. This was all dropped on me rather suddenly. I haven't had time to develop a lesson plan." Mr. Howlen said honestly.

"Then don't plan it. Just show us what else there is in sorcery besides illusions." Lex said frankly.

"The types of magic I show you will have to be limited to the types of magic we can each access." Mr. Howlen slowly explained.

"I have air and Lucky has whatever he can copy. That sounds like we'll be able to do just about anything." Lex said simply.

"Do you think that Lucky would be able to copy someone who's ranked at the highest levels of their magical field?"

"Probably not. From what Doctor Williams said, Lucky's going to keep getting stronger over time. To me, that means that he must be at his weakest right now." Lex said carefully.

"Considering that he was able to cast a fully realized self-portrait illusion on his first try, I'd say that he's sufficiently empowered to be able to learn most anything that I would be capable of teaching him." Mr. Howlen said diplomatically.

"So you don't think we're too young to be here?" Lex asked with a grin, obviously not believing it to be so.

"At first glance, I think you *appear* to be too young to take on this level of responsibility. But after talking to you, I believe that, with a certain degree of understanding on my part, you will both be capable of performing at a level commensurate with your peers." Mr. Howlen said carefully.

"I don't like how you're using wiggle words to not say what you're pretending that you're saying." Lex said seriously.

"I'm trying to say that I believe in you and am willing to teach you. I just don't want for you to get the idea that because you have some impressive skills, that you don't have anything left to learn. Actually, you appear to be at a good point, right about where your classmates are. If you want to stay competitive, you'll need to keep after your training." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

"We've got Paul and G at home, impressing people all over the place. We'll keep on top of things just so those two don't leave us in the dust." Lex said frankly.

"Don't make the mistake of basing your performance on others' achievements. Use them as a measure, of course, but then define your objectives for yourselves. Otherwise, you risk spending your high school career and beyond in someone else's shadow. Don't let the comparison to your brothers be your only driving force." Mr. Howlen warned.

"I have a friend named Obby who will make sure that won't ever happen. You could call him an authority on stuff like that." Lex said seriously.

"Given your circumstance, I still think it's worth keeping in mind." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

"We'll watch out for it. But in the meantime, Lucky and I are going to compete against each other, too. That should help us to keep it real." Lex said with a grin at Lucky.

Lucky nodded his confirmation.

"I suppose that's a more realistic criteria to use to judge oneself. At least you'll be working toward the same objectives." Mr. Howlen said cautiously.

"Are we done with the testing for a minute? Can we sit down?" Lex asked hopefully.

"Oh, yes. Of course." Mr. Howlen said as he led them to a section of the room that looked more like a traditional classroom, except that instead of rows of desks, they had groupings of them, where a small number of people could comfortably hold a conversation.

* * * * *

A few of the other conversation areas were occupied, but Mr. Howlen and the boys were easily able to find one that was secluded enough that they wouldn't disturb anyone else.

After sitting down, Lucky attempted to take Zah Zah down off his shoulder, but she let it be known that she was having none of it. She hissed and made a half-hearted attempt to claw him.

"You don't control her?" Mr. Howlen asked curiously.

"I used to. She used to be more of a puppet than anything else. Uncle D showed me how to do some animation things to make her look more like she was alive, and I've been making changes of my own ever since." Lucky explained.

"But she doesn't listen to you when you tell her what to do?" Mr. Howlen asked cautiously.

"No. I mean, maybe. Sometimes she does what I want her to, but that might just be what she would have done anyway. I can't really be sure." Lucky reluctantly admitted.

"We might need to look into that." Mr. Howlen said with concern.

"Why? Are you an expert on created life?" Lex asked cautiously.

"No. Not at all." Mr. Howlen admitted, then explained, "But the behavior of this... manifestation... is troubling. It's unhealthy. I'm afraid that if it's allowed to continue,

that it could cause Lucky lasting damage on a psychological level... or possibly even on a physical one."

"Have you decided what kind of magic Lucky and I are going to be studying?" Lex quietly asked.

"No. We need to look at the possibilities and decide which of them will have the most potential benefit for you in the long run." Mr. Howlen said reasonably.

"Well, you're right about one thing. Something's wrong with Zah Zah. If you make her our project, we can get a grade for it and have the time and tools and library and stuff to do it right." Lex said seriously.

"And if I don't?" Mr. Howlen cautiously asked.

"I guess we'll work on some stupid book work thing that none of us really cares about so we can get grades to prove that we can take tests and memorize answers." Lex said frankly.

"Maybe it won't be as bad as you're thinking." Mr. Howlen hesitantly offered.

"And since we won't be doing anything to fix Zah Zah, we'll let you babysit her on the weekends, to give Lucky a break from always having to take care of her." Lex said with a teasing grin.

After a moment to consider, Mr. Howlen slowly said, "If we do this, it will almost certainly stray outside the confines of the Sorcery discipline."

"Good." Lex interjected.

"We're not Sorcerers, we're people." Lucky explained.

"That's what we were trying to tell you at the beginning, 'We're not just the one thing'." Lex said firmly.

"Are you really sure about this? If we decide to commit to this project, not only will your time and attention be devoted to it, but your grades will also be connected to the overall endeavor." Mr. Howlen cautioned.

"Go big or go home." Lex said simply.

"I think Zah Zah is going to end up being worth it." Lucky said confidently.

"I hope so, because it appears that she's going to be at the center of all our lives for the foreseeable future." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

Chapter 12

"Where do we start?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Since none of us has encountered this type of thing before, I believe the first step should be research. All three of us should look for whatever instances we can find of created beings being made and how their personalities and overall minds were constructed." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

"Would you have that information here?" Lex asked cautiously.

"We might. Given the instances of self-aware illusions that we know of, there might be an established methodology for constructing an artificial consciousness that we can follow." Mr. Howlen said carefully.

"Is that what we're doing? Constructing an artificial consciousness?" Lex asked with concern.

"I suspect that that may be what you've already done. What we're going to attempt to do now is look at what's been established and take corrective action, where possible and when necessary." Mr. Howlen explained.

"So you're not going to get rid of Zah Zah, you're just going to help to fix her?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"At this stage, I can only tell you what I'm intending to do. That might drastically change as more facts come to light." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

"I get that we're not doing an exercise from the book. Here in real life, there may not be a 'right' answer. Even if we do everything exactly right, things still might not end up the way we want them to be." Lex said gravely, apparently for Lucky's benefit.

"The truth is, if Zah Zah were stable and Lucky weren't in any danger, I would prefer to avoid this project entirely. You shouldn't look upon this as being one of the amenities of attending this school. I'm choosing to aid you in your quest because I believe it is the right thing to do." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

"Wait. Back up for a second. What do you mean that Lucky's in danger?" Lex asked anxiously.

"If this creation of Lucky's is an extension of his psyche, then we have to tread very carefully in what actions we choose to take toward it." Mr. Howlen said frankly, then glanced to find Lucky listening intently.

"And what if Zah Zah's not a fur ball full of daddy issues? What if she's just a magical cat with an attitude problem?" Lex prompted.

Lucky looked from Lex to Mr. Howlen and waited expectantly for an answer.

"Then we need to find out what went wrong with her creation and set it right. If she has even the slightest spark of sentience, then I want to give her every chance to have the best possible life." Mr. Howlen said honestly.

Lex glanced to his shoulder, then asked, "Does that apply to Zephyr, too?"

"If at any point I get the sense that he's self-aware and capable of independent thought, then yes, it will apply to him." Mr. Howlen said emphatically.

"You know, I never really had a thing for horses before, but Zephyr's growing on me." Lex said with a smile at the tiny horse perched on his shoulder.

"I think it's G who doesn't care about horses. You and him are different that way." Lucky said seriously.

"Yeah. G's thing has always been circuses in general and clowns in particular. I don't get the attraction. They don't do anything for me." Lex said honestly.

"Sometimes there are traits and themes that run in families. But just because your brother likes something doesn't automatically mean that you have to as well." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

Lex smiled at him, then said, "Yeah. I guess it's that 'living in the shadow' thing again. Maybe I need to call Obby and get reminded of what it means to be myself."

"You've mentioned him before. I don't know who that is." Lucky said honestly.

"He's a shadow demon... a really great guy. I know you'd like him." Lex said with a warm smile at the memory of a kindred spirit.

"Yeah. I'd like to meet him." Lucky said frankly.

"So, are we ready to get to work?" Mr. Howlen asked seriously.

"Sure. If you'll tell us what we can do, we're ready to put in the effort." Lex said confidently.

"Lucky, why don't you dive into the magic mirror spells and see if you can find any all-seeing oracles that aren't captured spirits? See if they give any account of how a consciousness was formed in the mirror." Mr. Howlen said decisively.

Lucky didn't wait to be given further instructions. He hurried immediately to the section of the large room that housed the Sorcery library.

"Lex, I'd like for you to investigate the ascension of lesser creatures and lower lifeforms. See if you can find how their minds were altered, or destroyed and reconstructed to grant them sentience." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

"Are you planning to do that to Zah Zah?" Lex asked with concern.

"I'm not planning anything at this stage, I'm just trying to gather all the possible pieces so that we can take a long look at what we have to work with and collectively decide what to do next."

"If you end up destroying Zah Zah, it's going to wreck Lucky. She's more than his pet, I think she's also his closest friend." Lex said frankly.

"I suspect that if I were somehow able to destroy the manifestation of Zah Zah here and now, that Lucky would simply recast her... possibly not even consciously." Mr. Howlen said gravely.

"What are you saying? That she's unstoppable?" Lex asked cautiously.

"No. I'm not saying anything. This is all speculation based on my observations. I could be completely wrong. I just want to voice these possibilities so that you can keep them in mind as you're searching for spells to help resolve our situation." Mr. Howlen said carefully.

"What *is* our situation?" Lex asked cautiously.

"We appear to have a matter construct of an animal with unnatural self-awareness, lacking any sort of control, self or otherwise." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

"When you put it that way, it doesn't sound too good." Lex reluctantly admitted.

"I suppose if the goal were for us to find a worthy cause for you to work on for a grade, you could have done a lot worse." Mr. Howlen weakly offered.

"Do you want me to do crystal balls too, or do you want me to leave them for one of you?" Lucky asked as he emerged from the bookshelves with a book open in his hands.

"Why don't you go ahead and take them? I would expect them to operate basically the same as the mirrors." Mr. Howlen said consideringly.

"Lex. I was just thinking that we know someone who knows about people like... you know... made people, like Zah Zah." Lucky said with a glance at Mr. Howlen.

"Who's that?" Lex asked uncertainly.

"Mah Zah. Since she knows about fighting forms and stuff like that, she might know something about making Zah Zah more real acting too." Lucky said seriously.

"Yeah. She's come through for us before. We'll have to talk to her about that when we get home tonight." Lex said slowly.

"You know someone who's versed in the mechanics of creating artificial beings?" Mr. Howlen asked cautiously.

"Mah Zah knows some things. I don't know if she knows anything about this, but if she doesn't, she might know someone else who does and be able to put us in touch with them." Lex said speculatively.

"Is the person you're talking about also a created being?" Mr. Howlen asked cautiously.

"No. Actually, she's a demon." Lex said simply, then slowly asked, "Do you have something against created beings?"

"No. Not at all. I just thought that because their names are so similar that they might have been created similarly." Mr. Howlen explained.

"I guess that makes sense." Lex relented, then explained, "Zah Zah was named after Mah Zah and Ginh Zah, Paul's demonic wizard familiars."

"You lead a very different life, don't you?" Mr. Howlen asked slowly.

"You have no idea." Lex chuckled.

Lucky nodded his agreement.

"Regardless, we have work to do. Lucky, you're investigating mirrors and orbs. Lex, you've got the lesser creatures being elevated into sentience. I'm going to be investigating instances of fully sentient creatures being created directly." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

Lex and Lucky nodded their agreement to the arrangement.

"Then let's hit it. If none of us has a miraculous breakthrough, we'll plan on meeting back here fifteen minutes before the final bell so that we can compare notes." Mr. Howlen said decisively.

"Right." Lex said as Lucky nodded his wholehearted agreement.

That being said, the group went their separate ways.

* * * * *

Lex located a bookcase with several books that had promise for containing the information he needed. As he diligently worked his way through the shelves, he wasn't able to find much that had to do with elevating lesser beings.

In those few instances where intelligent animals were mentioned at all, nothing was said of 'how' they came to be. From a storytelling perspective, they simply conveniently 'were'.

There was an anthology of antiquated fables and lore that Lex was initially going to bypass, since it seemed unlikely to have anything relevant to their realm. But in the end he decided to at least leaf through them on the off chance that they might have something inspirational, if not informative.

Lex skimmed through one strange tale of how the faerie people of a distant land lived for aeons in peace and tranquility until unscrupulous witches came into their midst and befriended them as a prelude to betrayal.

Lex was surprised, since he was used to reading stories where witches were the heroes or sometimes the unfortunate victims. Although mundane people had an annoying habit of telling stories about evil witches, they tended to be so far-fetched that they couldn't be taken seriously.

Just as Lex was about to close the book and move onto something else, a particular phrase caught his eye.

He literally froze in place for a moment, then carefully looked back to prove to himself that it wasn't his eyes playing tricks on him.

As he carefully read the page in front of him, he once again saw the phrase that sent a chill up his spine.

'*The Children of the Sun*'.

* * * * *

After a glance at the clock to assure him that he had time to take a brief detour in his investigation, Lex began to dive into the text to try and unearth the whole story.

Since the story was about the faeries, it focused mostly on things from their point of view. Likewise, the author or authors of the various stories seemed to assume that the reader was already familiar with certain things, many of which, Lex had little or no knowledge of.

The tale of the faeries that was told was epic in its scale, but the small bit of information about their adversaries was difficult to piece together.

As near as Lex could tell, a small band of witches, 'the children of the sun', so called by the faeries, professed to come in peace and announced their intention to live in harmony with the indigenous people and the land.

Apparently, in less than a dozen generations, the offspring of the children of the sun, referred to collectively only as 'the witches', broke the covenant of their ancestors and eventually drove the faeries completely out of the land of their people.

"Lucky, just what are you?" Lex muttered as he puzzled over the ancient fable, which appeared to be hiding the truth from him in plain sight.

"Your first day at school and you're already talking to yourself?" A voice interrupted.

Lex turned and smiled at the sight of G.

"Actually, I was talking to Zephyr." Lex said as he indicated the tiny horse standing on his shoulder, then explained, "He's a very good listener."

"I can imagine." G said with a grin, then stepped closer to examine Lex's artistry as he muttered, "That is some beautiful work... really outstanding."

"It's one of those things where everything just seemed to fall into place. When that happens, you can either fight it or roll with it." Lex said happily.

"You've named him Zephyr?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. I thought that since you have Mah Zah and Lucky has Zah Zah, that it might be nice for me to have someone around, you know, for company." Lex said awkwardly.

"Believe me, I know what it's like to be lonely."

"Yeah. I was there. I remember." Lex assured him.

"Right. I just got done with Doctor Williams and thought you'd want to know how all that went." G said frankly.

"Oh, yeah. So what did he say? Am I going to be getting new brothers and sisters every time you create an illusion?" Lex asked somewhat playfully.

"I'll leave the brother and sister making to Mom and Dad. Doctor Williams still isn't sure about what happened to create you, but he seems reasonably certain that it won't accidentally happen again."

"Good. Because it would seriously mess with your school stuff if you couldn't create illusions anymore." Lex said honestly.

"But until he's figured out exactly what happened, I'm forbidden from holding any ancient relics of elemental power." G said with a grin.

"Darn. There go *my* plans for the weekend." Lex said playfully.

"So that's about it. I need to get back to Tauru and see what he's been able to accomplish without me the last few days. I just thought you'd want to know." G said frankly.

"Yeah. Thanks for that." Lex said sincerely, then quickly asked, "Could you look at something for me before you go?"

G looked down at the book in Lex's hands, then asked, "Is this what had you talking to your horse?"

"Yeah." Lex admitted, then continued, "While I was researching for our project, I came across this faerie legend."

G bent down and lifted the front of the book to get a look at the title.

"It tells the story of how a small band of witches took over an entire realm and drove the faeries out of their homeland." Lex cautiously explained.

"You'll need to keep in mind that this is a collection of fables from a foreign realm. If it happened at all, it happened in a whole other time and place and probably within a completely different magical paradigm." G cautioned, then further explained, "The important thing to keep in mind when you're reading one of these things is that what this describes not only didn't happen in this realm, it probably *couldn't*."

"What about... what if the invading witches brought their own magical paradigm with them?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Okay... speaking hypothetically... if there *were* a way to do that, then I suppose that a small group of witches could go into a faerie kingdom or an underworld domain or even a celestial realm and have access to magics that the natives of the land wouldn't." G said consideringly.

"And the natives likely wouldn't have any defense against it, either." Lex said thoughtfully.

"I guess not. I mean, eventually they would. 'Necessity is a mother' and all that. But to begin with, they wouldn't be able to defend against new magic that they themselves couldn't wield... theoretically speaking of course. I have no idea what happened in that book you're reading." G hurried to explain.

"It doesn't matter what happened in that instance. I'm more worried about the overall situation that it proposes." Lex said frankly.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" G asked with honest concern.

"If you could be there to listen when I'm ready to talk it out, that might actually help me a lot." Lex cautiously suggested.

"You can count on it." G assured him.

"Oh, yeah, there *was* one other thing." Lex hurried to say before G went back to his lab partner.

"What's that?" G asked attentively.

"I was wondering if you'd mind if I borrowed some of the Lapis Lazuli from the stuff Mom left behind... I mean, your mom, you know, M's stuff." Lex verbally fumbled.

"Yeah. I guess. You'll have to ask Dad, but I don't think he'll care. It's not doing anyone any good in the storeroom." G said honestly, then cautiously asked, "What for?"

"Lucky and I have a project in Basic and I thought we could use a chunk of Lapis to house an enchantment." Lex said frankly.

"If I remember right, Mom left a bunch of that charm stuff when she bailed on us. If you've got a use for it, then you should use it." G said seriously.

"It won't stir up too many bad memories for you, will it?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Maybe a few, but that was a long time ago. It's probably time for me to deal with it and let it go." G said more quietly.

"Just let me know if there's anything that I'm doing that brings back something painful for you. I really don't want that. It's just that, the more I think about it, the more I get the feeling that I could actually be pretty good at charm magic... the way it works kinda makes sense to me."

"Good for you. I never had an interest in it, myself. Paul has the interest, but absolutely no talent. He has to have Filipe help him to be able to do much of anything. If you can find a way to make it work, you've got my full support." G said seriously.

"I won't know until I try, but I'm interested, and I'd like to see what I can do with it."

"I guess this is going to drag you out of your 'air only' rut." G said with a smile.

"I didn't realize that I was in one." Lex said hesitantly.

"Would you ever think of an air elemental needing a charm of any kind?"

"No. I guess not." Lex said uncertainly.

"What I'm saying is that you're more than the label you wear. I think *this* is what makes a person real."

"Charm magic?" Lex asked with a faux innocent expression.

"No, you goof. I mean being a person with your own interests and ideas, not conforming to any list of requirements because your species or elemental affinity demands it. If you want to do charms, then do charms. Leave the tiny twisters to the air practitioners who have no imagination or soul, to speak of." G said passionately.

"I never thought of it that way." Lex said quietly.

"I know you didn't. But that's what makes it so special that you still decided to color outside the lines. Now instead of being an air elemental trying to find his way in the world, you're a person with a whole world of possibilities open to you." G said seriously.

"I guess it all depends on how you look at it, but hearing you say it *does* make me feel more secure in my personhood." Lex said introspectively.

"Well, good." G said with a smile, then declared, "I need to get back to Tauru before he tries to rig our illusion all by himself."

"Yeah. Thanks for stopping by to let me know how it went. At least I won't have to worry about getting any new brothers and sisters all of a sudden." Lex finished with a smile.

"Don't count Mom and Dad out just yet. You've seen how they look at each other." G said with a grin before hurrying away.

Lex smiled at the thought, then went back to reading the story of the conquered faerie realm.

* * * * *

"Lex, could you look at something for me?" Lucky asked as he approached.

"Sure. Did you find something?" Lex asked as he set his book aside.

"I don't know. It looks like it could be important, but they talk in circles so much I can't really tell if they're saying anything or just double-talking to make it sound like they know what they're talking about." Lucky said sourly.

After a moment of reading, Lex hesitantly said, "I'd guess from looking at the way this is written that their assignment must have been required to have at least a minimum number of words."

"But do you think there's anything here that we can use? This stupid thing just goes around in circles forever." Lucky said frustratedly.

"You're the one researching mirrors and orbs. If you decide that this thing doesn't tell us anything useful, then that's it. We won't look into it any further." Lex said seriously.

"Yeah. I guess I'll keep reading, at least until I know that it doesn't tell us anything to do with Zah Zah." Lucky said in resigned acceptance.

"That sounds like a good way to go." Lex said frankly.

"Did you find anything that will help us?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I don't know yet. I found a story that talks about the children of the sun, but so far it hasn't really said anything that we don't already know." Lex said seriously.

"Is that it?" Lucky asked as he looked at the book Lex was holding.

"Yes. I need to look at it a little bit more, just in case it has something important in it. But from the way it looks so far, it's just a story." Lex said frankly.

"I want to read it anyway. Even if it's just a made-up story, if it's about people like me, I want to know what it has to say." Lucky said honestly.

"Yeah. I can totally see that. When I'm done, I'll keep the book out for you." Lex said seriously.

Lucky looked at the book that he had brought with him, then down at the book in Lex's hand before hesitantly asking, "You don't want to trade, do you?"

"Not a chance." Lex said without hesitation.

* * * * *

At the appointed time Lex, Lucky, and Mr. Howlen arrived in the conversation area of the classroom.

"Did either of you find anything that might help us?" Mr. Howlen asked curiously.

"I found a book with some stories that Lucky might enjoy, but I really didn't come across anything that told how 'elevated' animals or creatures had their intelligence

raised. If I had to guess, I'd say that it's something that's tied up in the god powers." Lex said frankly.

"I think the majority of those I discovered were also created by gods." Mr. Howlen admitted.

"All the mirrors and orbs that I found were otherworld beings who were trapped in dimensional pockets for eternity or the spirits of the dead who had been bound to an object on the earthly plane." Lucky said uncomfortably.

"It sounds like hell on earth." Lex said frankly.

"Actually, hell might not be so bad in comparison. Imagine being trapped for eternity behind a sheet of glass, without hope of ever moving on to what comes next." Mr. Howlen said distantly.

"What *does* come next?" Lucky asked curiously.

"Surprisingly, different things for different people. There's a whole course of study that focuses on that and leads you to find your own answers. All I have to tell you on the subject is that it's *something*. The 'nothing' that you describe within the orbs and mirrors is a fate that is horrifying to me." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

"But none of the magic mirrors or all-seeing orbs were created beings capable of independent thought?" Lex asked to be sure.

"From what I've read so far, most of them are trapped djinns. Whoever did that to them must really trust in their magic because djinns are some of the last beings I'd ever want to make mad at me." Lucky said honestly.

"They'll be mad at you no matter what. If a djinn is ever nice to you, it means that he's trying to trick you into doing something that will end up destroying you." Lex warned.

"That's a bit of a generalization, but probably one that will serve you well if you ever encounter a djinn in person." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

"Have you ever seen one?" Lex asked curiously.

"Yes. Only once. From a respectable distance, of course." Mr. Howlen said frankly, then asked, "Lex, were you not able to find any useful information about elevated creatures?"

"Most of what I found didn't say how or why they were able to think or speak. The rest were shapeshifters who were already sentient, so it didn't really help." Lex said frankly.

"As I said earlier, most of what I found were instances of beings created by gods... usually as part of a dubious creation or origin myth." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

"Yeah. I was wondering something about that." Lex reluctantly interjected.

"What was that?" Mr. Howlen asked curiously.

"The God, it doesn't matter which one, creates one man and one woman. How can they populate a world or even an expansive area, starting with just the two of them?" Lex asked cautiously.

"If everything is as it appears and no further magic is used, then I'd say that they can't." Mr. Howlen said simply, then asked, "Did you come across such a myth that caught your interest?"

"Well, yeah. The new people weren't created... at least, not in the story that I read, but they arrived in this new place and had so many kids that they ended up taking over the whole realm."

"From whom?"

"What?"

"If they took over the place, did they wrest control from another group of people?"

"Yeah. They drove away the people who were already living there." Lex said uncomfortably.

"That may resolve your earlier question. The need for genetic diversity would require more than a pair of people to populate a world, but breeding with an indigenous population could create an abundance of offspring that could, by some standards, be counted among the invaders' number."

"And if they were from two different species of people, then their kids might be something different from either one of their parents." Lex said speculatively.

"I hadn't thought of it, but yes. I suppose that's possible." Mr. Howlen said consideringly.

"Did you figure something out?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"No. I was just reasoning through some stuff." Lex said seriously.

"Do you have time to try doing Paul's water spell?" Lucky asked hopefully.

Lex looked at the clock, then asked Mr. Howlen, "Are we done? Or did you have something else for us?"

"No. I think we've all had a productive day and made good first steps on our project."

"Good." Lex said happily, then turned to Lucky and said, "Tell me what to do."

"Make a fireball." Lucky said simply.

"I'm so weak with fire, even that's kind of pushing it." Lex said frankly as he created one little plume of flame.

"Don't do it, but do you think you could turn that flame into a little tornado if you wanted to?" Lucky asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah, sure... I guess so." Lex said uncertainly.

"Good. Then all I need for you to do is do that, but the other way." Lucky said confidently.

"I have no idea what you're telling me to do." Lex said honestly.

"I'm going to show you the moves and the words now, but when it's time to let go of the magic, go opposite what you would do with air... go away from the air. Go toward the water." Lucky said firmly.

"I don't think I have any water." Lex said honestly.

"Air has water all its own, but you have to look for it." Lucky said seriously, then added, "Plus, Paul gave you some more water on top of that. He tied it into who and what you are. Find it."

"Okay. Show me what to do before I lose this." Lex said anxiously.

Mr. Howlen watched curiously as Lucky led Lex through an intricate and bizarrely foreign spell. Any resemblance to familiar magic was purely coincidental.

It seemed to take an inordinate amount of time to complete, but eventually Lucky came to a stop and waited for Lex to finish.

As soon as Lex uttered the last word, the little flame twisted and convulsed one time before becoming a little fountain of water.

"That's yours." Lucky declared.

When Lex looked at him uncertainly, Lucky explained, "That's *your* water."

"I hear the words that you're saying, but I don't think I'm getting what you're trying to get across to me." Lex said honestly.

"It's like Zah Zah. She's not something made *by* me. She's made *from* me." Lucky said imploringly.

After a moment to consider, Lex slowly asked, "So if I made Zephyr out of *my* water, then he'd be made *from* me instead of made *by* me?"

"I'm trying to describe something I don't have the right words for, but that's the best way I know to tell you the difference between your magic and mine." Lucky explained.

"Well, it's *different*. I got that much for sure." Lex said frankly.

"Do you want to cast Zephyr again, using your water this time? Then you'll know what I'm talking about." Lucky said cautiously.

"I didn't realize that I lost him when I was trying to conjure the water." Lex said honestly.

"Perhaps you should wait for when you have more time." Mr. Howlen suggested.

"I probably should, but the only way I'll understand what Lucky's trying to show me is to go through with it." Lex said, then without waiting for approval or rebuttal, he began performing his spell to create his foggy little friend.

When Zephyr resolved into being this time, it was in his fully realized form with the complete illusion in place.

"You're not casting the illusion. How did it come into full being like that?" Mr. Howlen hesitantly asked.

"Zephyr knows what you expect him to look like, so he tries to be that for you." Lucky easily explained.

"Does Zah Zah do that for you too?" Lex asked cautiously before starting his spellcasting.

"She knows what I expect her to look like, so she looks that way. If she didn't do that, she'd still be scribbles with red dots for eyes." Lucky said frankly.

"That appeared to take next to no effort." Mr. Howlen observed.

"I just did the nuggle. The water took over from there and put everything else where it needed to be." Lex said slowly as he confirmed what he was feeling.

"But Zephyr isn't just a project that you worked on now, is he?" Lucky persisted.

"No. He's my buddy." Lex confirmed, then continued by asking, "So before, you used the magic Paul showed you, but didn't put 'yourself' into it. Am I getting that right?"

"Yeah. I guess so." Lucky hesitantly confirmed, then continued, "When I left with Mom and Star, I had lots of time to work on Zah Zah. I kept trying different things and working with her until I finally figured out how to make different things work."

"You did a great job... I mean, with the illusion you've created, I couldn't tell that she wasn't a regular cat... well, except when she explodes into a scribbled nightmare." Lex said frankly.

"I just learned the illusion when I got here and saw how G did his illusions. Once I saw how that worked, I was able to make something like it and wrap it around Zah Zah so she wouldn't feel ugly and like people were staring at her." Lucky said timidly.

Mr. Howlen seemed to be about to say something, but Lex motioned for him to hold back before asking, "Is that how Zah Zah felt?"

"Yeah. But even when she's pretty on the outside, she still feels ugly on the inside. I think maybe that's why she's so angry all the time." Lucky said seriously.

The sound of the bell ringing precluded any further interrogation.

"You two have a good weekend. Be sure to write down any questions or ideas that you come up with for our project. We'll look them over together and tackle them on Monday." Mr. Howlen said seriously.

"Do you mind if we take this book with us? Lucky wants to read it." Lex asked hopefully.

"Just be sure to bring it back. Knowing how the school does things, it may very well be one of a kind." Mr. Howlen said frankly.

"We'll be careful with it." Lex assured him as he gathered things to prepare to leave.

"Zah Zah and Zephyr can't leave the classroom with us." Lucky said quietly.

"Oh yeah. Thanks for reminding me. I'm going to have to get used to that." Lex said seriously, then turned to Zephyr and regretfully said, "I'm going to have to let you go for now, but I'll call you back as soon as I get home."

The little horse leapt off his shoulder in slow motion, then began to slowly gallop away as he dissipated.

"Now that you can call on your water, you can bring him back up whenever you want." Lucky said happily.

"Maybe. I might need for you to show me that spell a few more times before I can do it on my own. It's so different, I'm not sure that I can remember it all."

"The water will remember most of it for you. It just has to know what you want to do and it'll help you try to do it." Lucky said with certainty.

Lex shared a concerned look with Mr. Howlen before hurrying to fall in step with Lucky so that they could meet up with G at the classroom door.

Chapter 13

"So, how do you like your teacher? You got Howlen, didn't you?" G asked as the trio walked away from the classroom.

"I don't think I ever had a teacher before who asked me what I thought about things or let me choose anything important." Lucky said quickly.

Lex nodded his agreement, then added, "No matter how great the other teachers are, Mr. Howlen seems to be going out of his way to help us. This isn't about his job or our grades. He saw that we needed help and decided to help us. Now, we need to make sure that he never has a reason to regret it. We've got to put in the work that we promised to."

"What kind of project are you guys going to work on?" G asked curiously as they walked at a casual pace.

"I don't know how much Mr. Howlen is sticking his neck out for us so it'd probably be best if we didn't spread it around. But basically, Mr. Howlen said that he'd help us figure out how to make Zah Zah okay to be around people.... you know, not so vicious all the time." Lex carefully explained.

"Can you even do that with sorcery?" G asked curiously as they ambled along.

"Maybe." Lex offered uncertainly, then explained, "Mr. Howlen thinks that there are some self-aware magic mirrors and illusions and stuff that are made that way with sorcery. So far, everything I've found has pointed to all that being done with god-powers or necromancy, but we've only just started."

"Well, if you need any help with the necromancy stuff, I know some people who should be able to help you." G said frankly.

"Actually, I think Zah Zah has a little too much spirit, the last thing we need is to try sticking another one in there." Lex said honestly.

"But do you think it'd make her be able to have good thoughts and happy dreams?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"What's that?" G asked curiously.

"If Zah Zah had a spirit, would that make her so she could be able to smile and laugh?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"I don't think cats normally do that." Lex said slowly.

"No. But I see what he's asking." G said simply, then explained, "I don't know if it would work or not, but it sounds like a valid question."

"What question? I think I missed it." Lex asked hesitantly.

"He was asking if we need to give Zah Zah a soul." G said seriously.

"Good luck with that. I don't even know if *I've* got one, much less, how to give one to Zah Zah." Lex said honestly.

"You have one. I've already seen enough to know that without a doubt." G said without hesitation, then continued, "And if you determine that you need to recruit a soul, I suggest that you talk to Karras or Vinda. They know all the ins and outs of it and will keep you from making any rookie mistakes."

"Do you think we should just go ahead and do that?" Lex asked cautiously.

"No. You need to do your research and see if you can find your answers using sorcery. Not only will you be helping Zah Zah that way, but you might end up learning what you need to know to help Lex, in case something goes wrong with his base spell one of these days." G said seriously.

"It took you guys long enough! There are vans waiting for us, remember?" Vinda asked impatiently from the hallway intersection ahead of them.

"Real world." G said quietly to his companions, then more loudly he called out, "I was grilling Lucky and Lex about their first day of classes. You guys are just jealous because you didn't get to them first."

"As much as I'd like to hear all about that, we really *do* need to get outside before the vans leave without us." Vinda said urgently.

"Well then, lead the way." G said as the trio increased their pace.

* * * * *

The two groups merged and moved outside to the curb where the vans were already lined up, waiting for their expected passengers.

"That's not your usual van, is it?" Curtis asked as he pointed at what might be described as a small luxury bus.

"No, it isn't. But I think that's Tony, our regular driver. We'd better get over there and find out what's going on." G said seriously.

"Hey! Before you go, how did you guys like your first day?" Curtis quickly asked.

"It was alright. It looks like we ended up with some really good teachers." Lex answered for both of them.

"Remember to tell us all about it on Monday." Curtis said as he stopped by his own van.

"Yeah. We'll do that." Lex said before he was whisked away by Paul and G.

Lucky seemed to be about to say something, but instead, gave Curtis a helpless, apologetic look before hurrying to follow the others.

* * * * *

"Hey Tony! What's with the new bus?" Paul asked uncertainly from the open passenger side door.

"We couldn't safely fit more people into the van. So when the transport company was notified that you had two more scheduled riders, they decided that it would be better to get us a bigger vehicle, rather than hire a second driver and send two vans for the same route." Tony said seriously.

"I guess that makes sense." G said as he cautiously followed Paul aboard.

"It's got that new car smell." Lex said as he tried to see every detail at once.

"I've got a list of the new passengers, but I'd still like to be introduced, so that I'll know you by sight." Tony said as his seat pivoted so that he could easily talk to his passengers.

"I'm Lucky Darroch, Paul and G's cousin." Lucky said seriously.

Tony looked him over one time, then said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Lucky. My name is Tony, and I will be your regular driver."

Tony turned his attention to the next boy in line and said, "By process of elimination, you must be Lexington."

"Lex."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lex, I'm Tony, as I was telling Lucky, I'm your regular driver. If anyone else arrives to pick you up, make sure that you question it and receive satisfactory answers before leaving the school grounds with anyone you don't know." Tony said seriously.

"Yeah. I'll be careful." Lex said cautiously.

"Let's see... I see Catherine, I see Sandy, has anyone seen Dexter today?" Tony asked as he reviewed his clipboard.

"We had a project outside of school for a few days. He's probably resting up from that." G easily explained.

"Since he didn't ride in with us, that checks out." Tony said as he put his clipboard away and turned his seat facing forward.

"Settle in and get comfortable. We're riding in luxury now." Tony said happily before starting the engine.

* * * * *

Due to the larger vehicle, the boys didn't have to climb over each other to get to their seats.

Paul and G took their customary seats in the far back, but were surprised to find that the large bench seat had more in common with a sofa than any typical car seat. Lex and Lucky took seats in captain's chairs near the front of the bus and found that their vantage point afforded them a nearly unobstructed view in all directions. They were perfectly placed to get the panoramic view of the landscape surrounding them.

"This is really nice." Sandy said in amazement as she surveyed her surroundings.

Paul and G shared a look, silently agreeing that it must be pretty special for their resident 'mean girl' wannabe to openly appreciate it.

* * * * *

The ride from the school to the Darroch homestead wasn't a particularly long one, but it took more than a few minutes.

By the time the bus pulled up to the front door, Paul, G, and Lex were all fast asleep.

"I'll get them." Lucky said automatically, then went about the business of waking his sleeping family.

"What happened?" Paul asked groggily.

"You fell asleep on the way home from school." Lucky said gently as he nudged G to awaken.

"We need to talk to Dad about getting some of these seats at home. They're the most comfortable chairs I think I've ever sat in." Paul said as he fought to sit up.

"Or maybe you were just really tired." G said as he looked, half-lidded at Paul.

"Yeah. Maybe." Paul allowed.

"The driver's waiting on us. Come on." Lucky said before dashing away to wake Lex.

"I don't want to get up. This is 'perfect'." Paul said to G as his eyes began to close again.

"How about, when we get inside, I put on an anime and we take a nap on the couch for a little while before dinner?" G gently suggested.

"Yeah. That'd be nice, too." Paul said as he forced himself to get up.

* * * * *

"Lex, it's Lucky. We're home." Lucky said gently.

"That's... beautiful." Lex said as he slowly opened his eyes.

"What is?" Lucky asked curiously.

"Being in a place that you can call home with someone you love to wake you up... it's like, how could anything go wrong in the world when you have that?" Lex asked with a slow smile.

"Everyone is waiting for us to get off the bus so that they can go to their own homes." Lucky quietly explained.

"Oh. I just got so comfortable I forgot where I was for a minute." Lex said as he sat up fully.

"I'm glad you were able to get some good sleep. That's the best." Lucky said happily.

"Yeah. Let's talk about it when we're inside." Lex said as he got out of his chair.

"I take it you guys like the new wheels." Tony called back with a grand smile.

"If you notice some of your chairs missing one of these days, you should probably check our house first." Lucky answered playfully.

"I'll keep that in mind." Tony chuckled, then thought to add, "Don't worry about anything, Lucky. You're going to fit in fine here."

"Thanks." Lucky said with surprise as he followed Lex off the bus.

* * * * *

"Can you feel that?" Paul asked as they walked around the side of the house.

"What?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"The weekend. It's finally here." Paul finished with an ebullient smile.

Lucky couldn't help but smile in response, even though the arrival of the weekend wasn't normally a cause for celebration for him.

"Look. That's new." G said as he pointed.

"It looks like they're adding an outside door to the glassed-in bridge." Paul said uncertainly.

"I bet that Dad doesn't want for Lucky and Lex to have to go through our room to get to theirs." G said speculatively.

"So, if we go in the hallway door, we could go to any one of our rooms?" Lucky asked to verify his understanding.

"Yeah. It looks that way." G somewhat confirmed.

* * * * *

After a tug on the door handle, Paul quietly asked, "Did you lock it?"

"Do I ever?" G asked in response.

As they looked around, one by one they noticed what was happening nearby.

"Why would they lock this door if they're working all the way down there?" G asked curiously.

"I don't know, but from the look of it, we can't use the bridge or the new door they're installing yet. So, if they've got this door locked too, they must not want us in there." Paul slowly reasoned as he tried the doorknob again, somehow expecting a different result.

"I guess we'll have to go in the house and find out what's going on." G said reluctantly, obviously wanting for someone to come up with a better idea.

"They're probably making Paul's room into a suite of rooms for me and Lucky." Lex said seriously.

"Probably, yeah. But this is a little fast, even for Dad." G said frankly.

"C'mon. Let's find out what's happening." Paul said, then started walking back toward the main entrance to the house.

* * * * *

"Is it that time already?" Beth asked in surprise as the boys filed into the living room.

"Yeah. What's going on?" Paul asked cautiously.

"D had so much to catch up on after being away that he asked me to take charge of the room renovations. Since you weren't here to ask, I made a few assumptions about your preferences. I hope you don't mind." Beth finished sweetly.

"What did you do?" Paul asked warily.

"From what D was saying, he already discussed most of this with you. As far as I know, this is just what you already agreed on." Beth said frankly.

"I kinda figured that part out. But what are they doing out there right now?" Paul asked, even more slowly.

"I couldn't really tell you." Beth said honestly, then explained, "D told me what you had discussed with him, so I drafted a list of specifications based on that. Then, at the start of business today, I contacted D's designer and relayed them to him along

with the instructions that we would prefer it if the new rooms were ready for occupancy by the end of the weekend."

"Don't they have to get, like, building permits and stuff before they can even think about building anything?" Paul asked slowly.

"I suppose so. I don't really know. I just told the designer what we needed done and promised him a little something extra if he made it happen within our timeframe." Beth finished with a self-satisfied smile.

"So you've got people doing what's probably a two or three week job in a single weekend, just because you've got the money to make it happen?" Paul asked cautiously.

"You could look at it that way. I think the designer told me six different times that what I wanted wasn't possible and that he couldn't do it." Beth said seriously, then added with a smile, "All I did was challenge his assumptions and inspire him to be a bit more creative in his approach to problem solving."

"You're scary." Lucky said honestly.

"Sometimes you have to be scary to get the important things done." Beth said seriously, then added with a smile, "And sometimes you have to flex your muscles to remind yourself that you still have them."

"So, what are we supposed to do while they're working?" Paul asked in a small, lost voice.

"You know those bags you brought back from your trip? Everything's been laundered and repacked. I've taken the liberty of assembling comparable backpacks for Lucky and Lex. The plan is for you to leave around five o'clock." Beth said seriously.

"Leave for where?" Paul asked hesitantly.

"You're not sending us back to Kentucky, are you?" G asked hesitantly.

"No. Not Kentucky, I promise." Beth said as she fought down a chuckle at the reaction.

"Where are we going then?" Paul asked cautiously.

"D said that he wants for that to be a surprise. Lex and G are not to tell, or they will lose their S'mores privileges for the entire weekend." Beth said as she looked seriously at the named boys.

Paul looked to G with question.

"Dad makes his S'mores with Heath Bars. They're on a whole other level." G calmly explained.

"Okay. I think I'll stop asking questions and just go along with it. Heath Bar S'mores sound awesome. I'm not going to mess with that." Paul said simply.

"Do you know where we're going?" Lucky asked Lex curiously.

"On the train." Lex quietly responded.

Lucky thought about that for a moment, then seemed to be perfectly content with that answer.

"Everything's already been packed. All you have to do is meet at the train at 5:00." Beth said, then turned her back on the boys to devote her full attention to Kay in her stroller.

* * * * *

"All our stuff is packed and we're locked out of our rooms. What are we supposed to do until five o'clock?" Paul asked his companions as he looked around the living room.

"I know what I want to do." Lex said with a significant look at Lucky.

"Yeah! I want to let Zah Zah out, too." Lucky said happily as he unbuttoned the belly of his jacket.

"While you're here, let's see if I can summon Zephyr on my own." Lex said uncertainly as he went through the long-form version of the fireball spell, just so that he could be sure that he was doing everything as perfectly as possible.

Zah Zah climbed out of Lucky's jacket and looked around before climbing up his arm and finally coming to rest on his shoulder.

As soon as Zah Zah was in place, Lucky let his illusionary clothing go to reveal that he was wearing jeans and a red t-shirt.

Lex noticed what Lucky was doing, but didn't allow that to distract him from his task.

The hardest part of the entire exercise was the foreign spell with the counterintuitive gestures.

When it finally came time to let the magic loose, Lex remembered what Lucky had told him and did the exact opposite of what his instincts were telling him to do.

Much to his surprise, this time the little plume of flame seemed to turn inside out to reveal that inside, it had actually been water all along.

From there, summoning Zephyr seemed to happen all on its own.

While Lex *did* have to form the hand signs and say the words, they felt like they were mostly a formality. Zephyr was guiding the majority of the magic himself.

The illusionary overlay was a mere afterthought compared to the rest and happened with almost no thought or effort on Lex's part.

"What have you got there?" Beth asked curiously as she looked up from the stroller and returned her attention to the boys.

"His name is Zephyr." Lex said proudly as Zephyr perched on his shoulder and held his head high.

"It's absolutely lovely. I don't think I've ever been able to create anything this beautiful." Beth said in awe, then glanced at Paul and added, "Present company excepted."

"Right." Paul said with a grin back at her.

"We were doing a group project in spelling and the nuggle ended up being the spell we chose to do." Lex said seriously.

"It looks too perfect to be a construct, but it has weight and physical presence, so it's not an illusion either." Beth said as she moved nearer to get a better look at it.

"He's created from mist, but then an illusion was hung on his misty physical form." Lex said informatively.

"So, it's an undine?" Beth slowly asked.

"No. Nothing so complicated. He's just a school project." Lex hurried to explain.

"So were you." G reminded him.

"No. I mean, even if he *were* more than a school project, I'm an *air* elemental. There's no way that I could conjure or summon a *water* elemental." Lex said seriously.

"I told you." Lucky said simply... perhaps a bit too simply.

"You told me what?" Lex asked cautiously.

"I told you about that water being '*yours*'." Lucky said seriously.

"I don't understand what you're trying to say." Lex said honestly.

"The water of your life, the water that Paul shared with you, *that's* what you're sharing with Zephyr." Lucky fought to explain.

"Are you saying that my soul is in the water?" Lex asked anxiously.

"No. I mean, I don't know about that. I just know that you shared part of what you really are with Zephyr." Lucky once again struggled to say.

"Is that the same part that Paul shared with me?" Lex asked mostly speculatively, obviously not expecting an answer.

"Yes." Lucky answered without hesitation, then explained, "You didn't have any water before, so what you shared with Zephyr would have to be part of what Paul gave you."

"It makes sense." Paul agreed.

"At least now we know that all of this wasn't *my* fault." G interjected.

"G gave Lex a shape and Paul gave him... substance." Lucky said carefully, obviously struggling to find the right words.

"So that makes you like my parents, doesn't it?" Lex asked with a playful grin.

"No." Beth snapped, "I will *not* be a grandmother this soon. You're brothers, that's final."

"I'm a cousin." Lucky reminded her.

"I SAID, you're brothers. Do you *really* want to fight me on this?" Beth asked firmly.

"No. I guess not." Lucky timidly answered.

"You can still call me Aunt Beth if you want to, but in just about anything else, you're counted exactly the same as my other children." Beth said frankly.

"Yes, ma'am." Lucky quietly responded.

"And just so we're clear about it, I *do* play favorites. Lucky, right now, you're leading the pack." Beth said before picking Kay up out of the stroller and walking out of the room.

* * * * *

"Did I just do what G did and create a sentient being?" Lex asked as he looked at Zephyr with concern.

"That's a tough call. I mean, how can you really tell if someone is sentient? If they're hardwired to react to certain situations in certain ways, then they're not really thinking for themselves, even if they look like they are." Paul said speculatively.

"At the same time, think about dogs and cats. We know that they can think and feel, but they don't have the level of intelligence required to be considered sentient." G said thoughtfully.

"Do you think Mah Zah and Ginh Zah would know?" Lucky asked curiously.

"They might." Paul admitted, then continued with a smile, "We can ask them."

"If we don't need to be doing anything else, maybe we could all go out back and horse around for a while." Lex suggested hopefully.

"We can't take the chance with the workers on the property. You'll need to hang on until we get to the train." G said, none too happy with the declaration.

"What are we going to do then?" Lucky asked curiously.

"Lex, weren't you wanting to get some Lapis?" G asked casually.

"Yeah, but we can do that anytime." Lex responded uncertainly.

"With us being locked out of the bedrooms and having the workers on the property, there's not a whole lot we *can* do right now. Maybe if you have your Lapis, you'll be able to move forward with your project." G said frankly.

"I left the cuff I was planning to use at school." Lex said in a wavering tone.

"There's probably another one in the charm supplies. Just look around and maybe you'll find what you need." G said encouragingly.

"Maybe, if there's lots of magic stuff there, we could find some books that'll help us with Zah Zah." Lucky said hopefully.

"I really can't see my mom having anything like that. That's just *so* not her style." G said frankly.

"Can we *please* change the subject? I've got a lot of conflicting emotions about her that I'd rather not have stirred up." Lex asked seriously.

"Yeah. Okay. I'm right there with you, Lex." G said sympathetically.

* * * * *

"I've never been in this part of the house before. I didn't even know this was here." Paul said as they entered the storeroom.

"That's kind of the point. This is where you put things to forget about them." G said frankly.

"Do you know where the stuff is that you're looking for?" Paul asked anxiously, obviously not entirely comfortable with what they were doing.

"Yeah, in general. Every now and then we'll need something from down here, so I know basically where things are kept. But I haven't explored every box or anything like that." G said seriously.

"Dad's not going to get mad at us for poking around down here, is he?" Paul asked with concern.

"I don't think he cares. If he had a problem with it, he probably would have said something about it sometime in the last ten years." G said frankly.

"I think it's over here." Lex said quietly as he pointed.

"Lead the way." G said simply.

"I was hoping you'd help me." Lex said honestly.

"Unless you need me to, I'd feel better hanging back as much as I can." G said frankly.

"Yeah. Okay. Sorry. I guess that since I have a use for this stuff, that gives me a reason to do even this much with it." Lex said quietly.

"Is there anything Lucky and I can do to help?" Paul hesitantly asked as he made a swirly motion, directed at the floor beside him.

"What we're trying to do is make a charm to house part of the spell for Lucky's uniform illusion. I think the way that Professor Woo explained it, the charm would do the magic that the witch didn't have a talent for so that they could complete the spell with the magic that they *did* have a talent for." Lex said carefully.

In response, Lucky did the short form version of the spell to restore his school uniform as it had been earlier.

"Okay. Yeah. That sounds smart." Paul said slowly, then added, "I've never tried to make a charm like that. All of my charms have held the entire spell so the person holding them didn't have to have any special ability at all."

"Something I was thinking about is that maybe instead of making a charm to house the standard version of the spell, that we might try using Lucky's 'special' interpretation of the spell to see how far we can push it and how much of the spell we could contain in the charm." Lex said carefully as he started looking through boxes.

"Mah Zah and Ginh Zah, we're going to help Lex find spell components for a charm he's going to create. You can help us if you want, or you can keep watch and protect our backs if you'd rather, whichever you think is better." Paul said seriously.

Ginh Zah let loose a forceful, singular meow, filled with meaning.

"What is it that you're looking for, exactly?" Paul asked Lex curiously.

"Lapis Lazuli and then maybe some kind of cuff or bracer to attach it to." Lex said seriously.

"What about a gauntlet?" Paul asked curiously.

"If you find one, we can look at it, but I don't think we're going to need anything that complicated." Lex said frankly.

* * * * *

Lex felt a movement on his shoulder and turned in time to see Zephyr leap off and gallop in slow motion through the air, toward a nearby tarpaulin.

"What'd you find there, boy?" Lex asked as he abandoned the box he was looking through.

"Your miniature horse can sniff out Lapis Lazuli?" Paul asked incredulously.

"I don't know. He must have sensed something over there. I'm not sure what he's found." Lex said as he started to shift the large tarp out of his way.

"If he knows what you're looking for, he'll help you to find it." Lucky said seriously.

"You know a lot more about all of this than you're saying, don't you?" Paul said speculatively.

"Yeah. But I don't *know* what I know. I just tell you things when I think about them." Lucky said honestly.

"So we can't assume that Lucky doesn't know something just because he didn't say anything about it. We need to be sure to ask him questions." G said seriously.

"What have you got there?" Paul asked curiously.

"I think Zephyr might have found what we're looking for... at least, when it comes to the stones." Lex said slowly as he opened one of the many shallow drawers of the antique typesetter's cabinet.

"It could take all day just to go through that dresser." Lucky said frankly.

"I have a feeling that it would be worth it. It looks like there's just about any kind of mineral you could ever want in here." Lex said as he reverently looked through the various rocks, attempting to identify them as he went.

There was a small snorting sound which drew Lex's attention, then he noticed Zephyr worrying at one of the lower drawers with his right front hoof.

"What have you got there, boy? Is it down there?" Lex asked as he immediately closed the drawer he had been looking through and moved to the lower one.

"You don't need any plant components for your charm, do you?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Not that I know of. We're actually still in the 'theory' stage of making the charm. We don't have an actual spell yet." Lex said as he slid the drawer open.

"That sounds really interesting. You'll have to show me how you do that." Paul said seriously, then asked, "So you're not going to need any of these spell ingredients?"

"Not that I know of. Once I start crafting the spell, I might realize that I need a catalyst or something, but I don't know about that now." Lex said as he looked through the shallow drawer of rocks. These were larger, by comparison, to the ones in the upper drawer, but were still relatively small and well suited to his needs.

"Mah Zah, Ginh Zah, I need for you to look at this." Paul said as a complicated spell diagram appeared on the ground.

"I'm leaving a trace portal here. If we find out that Lex needs some charm components, I'll open the other end of this wherever we are and send you here to get things for us. Will you be able to do that for me?" Paul asked seriously.

Ginh Zah remained silent, but Mah Zah barked a question.

"Lex, do you think Zephyr would be able to come here and get something for you if you needed him to?" Paul asked curiously.

"He's already shown that he's smart enough to know what I want and how to find it, but I'm not sure if he'd have the physical ability to get to it or carry it." Lex said as he picked up one particular rock and looked more closely at it.

"If Mah Zah and Ginh Zah could use Zephyr to locate the charm ingredients that we're looking for, they could collect it and bring it back to us themselves." Paul said seriously.

"Could Zah Zah go too?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"It would probably be best if she didn't. We'd have to be able to trust her to do what you tell her and to come back to you when she's supposed to." Paul said uncertainly.

Ginh Zah meowed her opinion into the conversation.

"If we end up sending the familiars on a mission, Ginh Zah says that she'll be happy to watch after her little sister, Zah Zah." Paul finished with a smile.

"Yeah. I guess she'd be okay if Ginh Zah was watching out for her." Lucky said with concern.

"We probably won't need to send them anyway." Paul said dismissively, then thought to ask, "What else do we need?"

"A cuff or a bracer that can house a magical enchantment *and* physically hold a stone which houses a different enchantment." Lex said seriously.

"Mah Zah, Ginh Zah, can you help me find that?" Paul asked seriously.

A sharp series of barks was Mah Zah's immediate reply.

After a moment, Lex cautiously asked, "What did she tell you?"

"It seems that while Mah Zah is a dog, she's not *that kind* of dog. She has no method for locating something that she's never seen nor smelled before." Paul said carefully, obviously translating.

"So my horse is a better bloodhound than your dog is?" Lex asked with a grin.

"In this case, yeah. But I'd still rather have Mah Zah helping me if we were looking for a missing person, or something like that. She has my complete confidence." Paul said in Mah Zah's defense.

"Yeah. You're probably right." Lex gently conceded, then turned to Zephyr and asked, "Can you help me find a cuff to put this stone on?"

As everyone watched, the little horse slowly galloped through the air toward the other side of the room.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. It's right where Zephyr said it would be." Lex said as he held it up to show it off.

"Nice. That's got some good veining. It should be able to channel magic really well." Paul said consideringly.

"It's exactly how I pictured it. If we can find a cuff to mount it on, then all that will be left is to develop the actual spell." Lex said as he followed Zephyr to his destination.

"What kind of cuff are you thinking of? What metal? What style?" Paul asked seriously as he continued to look through random boxes.

"Silver, not necessarily the metal, but the color. Not gold, brass, or bronze. I see the style as being... functional. Not frilly or fancy at all, but sleek, neat, uncluttered, and confidently crafted... elegant." Lex said distantly.

"Now, let's see if that's what Zephyr is leading you to find." Paul said with a smile at the tiny horse once again scraping his foreleg hoof on the side of a box.

"Look at this." Lucky whispered as he took an ornately carved wooden box out of a bundle of scarves and linens.

"What did you find?" G asked curiously.

"I don't know, but if it's in a box like this, it's probably something really important." Lucky said seriously.

"Or it's booze." G said frankly.

At Lucky's surprised look, G explained, "People like to put booze in fancy bottles and boxes for some reason, even though they're just going to *literally* piss it away. It's a lot of wasted effort for nothing."

"Should I open it?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"We should probably check it for traps or curses first." Paul warned from nearby.

"You can see curses, can't you?" Lex asked curiously as he looked up from the box he was digging in.

"Oh, yeah. I guess I can. I've never really had a reason to look for them before." Paul said as he moved to Lucky's side to get a better look at the box.

After a long moment, Paul finally said, "I can't tell you anything about what's inside the box, but the box itself isn't magically charged at all. If it's trapped somehow, it'd have to be in a mundane way."

"Do you think it's safe to open?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"I don't know. Ginh Zah, do you want to take a look at it?" Paul asked seriously.

Ginh Zah went up onto her hind legs and sniffed at the box in Lucky's hands, before slowly walking around his feet for a long moment.

After some consideration, Ginh Zah let loose a long sustained 'meow'.

"She says that there's something magical inside that's really powerful and *could* be a trap, but the box itself is safe." Paul translated.

"So it's okay if I open it?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Why don't you let me do it? If it turns out to be something bad, I can probably handle it best." Paul said as he held out his hands.

Lucky cautiously handed the box to him.

Paul gave the internal push to go into his demon form, then carefully opened the wooden box.

After a moment to look at the contents, Paul closed the lid and asked, "Where did you get this?"

"Right here." Lucky said as he pointed to an open cardboard box beside him.

Paul purposefully returned the carved wooden box to the nest of scarves and linens that it had come from, then made a point of folding the cardboard box closed before looking around.

"What was it?" G finally asked.

"Even me telling you could put you in danger. Knowing it's there, is kind of its own curse. Please, all of you, leave it in that box and never look in there again." Paul said anxiously.

"If it's that bad, shouldn't we get rid of it or destroy it or something?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"Trying to get rid of it makes it that much more likely that the curse will be activated by someone, whether it's us or not. Besides, I doubt that all of us together at peak magic could do anything to harm it. The closest we can come to destroying it is to leave it where it is and forget about it." Paul said firmly.

"I guess, since we don't know what it is, that we can probably forget it really easily." G said uncertainly.

"Do you think you could put a locking spell on the box so that someone can't come back in here and open it later?" Paul asked anxiously.

"I *can*. But a lock on a cardboard box is going to be strange for any mundane person who tries to open it and can't." G cautioned.

"I'm guessing that if a mundane person makes it this far into our house, he's already seen stranger things than a box that won't open." Paul said frankly.

"Well, since you seem so freaked out by it, I'll go ahead and put the super-duper lock on it that even Nazzy doesn't know how to crack." G said before enacting his spell.

Once the spell was complete, Paul wilted with relief and quietly said, "Now promise me that if I come to you later and ask, that you won't release the lock for me. I need to know without a doubt that it's completely out of my reach."

"Yeah. I won't open it and I doubt that Dad could crack this lock, either. You'd probably have to have someone who's at least at a senior professor level to get past it." G said seriously.

"Good." Paul said as he walked to G and engulfed him in a hug born from the need for comfort, more than passion.

Chapter 14

"So what else do you need for your charm?"

"All I've got so far is the Lapis. I still need to see what Zephyr has uncovered for me." Lex said as he moved to his nuggle's side and started digging in the box that Zephyr had indicated.

As he reached the spot inside the box that Zephyr had been worrying at, he found a tarnished silver brace gathered in amongst a variety of other trinkets.

"So, is it official? Is your horse part bloodhound?" Paul asked teasingly.

"I don't know about that, but it looks like he can sniff out magical components when I need him to. That's just as good in my book." Lex said as he gently petted his little friend.

There was a sudden hiss and a flash of movement as Zah Zah leaped from Lucky's arms and attacked.

Lex was helpless to react as the nightmarish cat creature lunged at his tiny companion.

"Zah Zah!" Lucky exclaimed as he sprang forward to gather her back into the tube of fur that he was still holding.

"Is Zephyr alright?" Paul asked with concern as he rushed to Lex's side.

"Yeah. I think so." Lex said uncertainly, then explained, "I was petting him when Zah Zah attacked. He must have an automatic force field or something. I felt it activate before I knew what was happening. When Zah Zah's claws would have hit him, his whole body scooted over a few inches and the attack slid off."

"So maybe Zephyr has his own built-in protection spell." G said speculatively.

"It's possible, but it's not something that I included in his definition. Maybe that's something that nuggles naturally have." Lex said thoughtfully.

"I haven't studied enough about them to even have a clue about something like that." G said frankly.

"I'm just glad he's alright." Lex said as he petted Zephyr gently.

"Zah Zah, if you can't behave yourself, I'm going to have to put you away when I'm around other people. I don't want to do that. I want you to have lots of friends." Lucky said firmly as he held the cat-like creature close to his chest.

A meow from Ginh Zah caught Paul's attention. He considered for a moment before translating.

"Ginh Zah says that it looks to her like Zah Zah was seeing Zephyr getting praised for doing something good while she was being ignored." Paul said carefully.

"Maybe you need to give Zah Zah a chance to do something good so that she can get praised like Zephyr." G cautiously suggested.

"It's possible that whether it's good attention or bad attention, it's all the same to her. She just needs to be at the center of things." Paul suggested.

"Mission accomplished." Lex cautiously mentioned as everyone watched to ensure that Zah Zah wasn't going to attack again.

"Lex, what else do you need for your spell? I'd like to get out of here if we can." G asked uncomfortably.

"Yeah. I'm mostly going to need general jewelry making supplies to attach the stone to the brace and maybe some metal cleaner." Lex said thoughtfully.

"We wouldn't have to worry about that if Dex were here." Paul said frankly.

"He's an earth elemental, so dismissing tarnish is one of his abilities." Lex quietly explained to Lucky.

"He doesn't get to use it much, but it *does* actually come in handy sometimes." Paul added.

"I wonder if there are any tricks like that, that I can do because I'm an elemental." Lex asked rhetorically.

"I don't know of any, but I've never really studied the subject." Paul said honestly.

"If Mom's right, then Zephyr may have a special talent like that too, as a water elemental." G quickly added.

"I don't know if I'm sold on that, but I guess we'll all find out together." Lex said frankly.

"Lex, check this out. See if any of the stuff you need is in this toolbox thing." Paul said quickly.

After gathering Zephyr onto his shoulder, Lex hurried to the desk where Paul was located and looked into the toolbox that he had found.

"Is this the kind of thing you were looking for?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Yeah. This looks like it has just about anything that I'd need for jewelry making." Lex said as he took a quick inventory, then continued, "The big thing I need I probably won't be able to get here. I still need the spells and diagrams to do an enchantment. I spent the whole class looking for them and couldn't find even one. I was actually hoping that you might be able to help us out with that."

"Is this for a grade?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Professor Woo was just saying what an interesting project this might be and then, when we told Mrs. Cualla about it, she said that we could try it." Lex said seriously.

"Good. It sounds like they're not expecting you to use any specific method." Paul said reasonably, then explained, "I know some spells and diagrams, just not the ones that you'll probably need to know."

"How's that?" Lex asked with interest.

"For example, you're going to be limited to what magical specialties you have access to. I know some spells and diagrams, but I can't use them on my own." Paul said frankly.

"Lucky might be able to use *his* magic to work around that." Lex said seriously.

"Or he might not." Paul countered.

"Do you think it'll hurt anything to try?" Lex asked simply.

"Good point." Paul conceded.

"So, are we done in here?" G asked hopefully.

"Just about." Paul told him, then focused on the demons at his feet and asked, "Can you two think of anything that we'll need from here to do a clothes changing spell charm?"

Ginh Zah immediately responded with a definite 'Meow'.

"How about, if we can come up with something to help Zah Zah be less ferocious, can you think of anything from here that we'll need for that?" Lex quickly asked.

After a long moment of consideration, Mah Zah gave a short, simple bark.

"She can't think of anything." Paul translated.

"Then, are we ready to go?" G asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Where to next?" Lex asked curiously.

"Since we're in this part of the house, we could stop by the library if you wanted. Maybe you'll find the spells you've been looking for in there." G cautiously suggested.

"One of these days you're going to have to give me a tour of the place. After all this time, I'm still finding rooms that I never knew existed before." Paul said frustratedly.

"Maybe they didn't." Lex said with an impish grin.

"Part demon, remember? It's probably not the best idea to make me think I'm crazy."

"If you were crazy, I'd be a figment of your imagination and I'm not, I'm a figment of G's... and Zephyr is a figment of mine. So, the way I see it, the only way you could be crazy is if Zephyr imagined you that way."

"I'm not sure that's how it works." G chuckled.

"I'm not the figment of anyone's imagination?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"No. I'm pretty sure that you're real. But Zah Zah is a figment of *your* imagination." Lex finished happily.

"It's this way." G said as he led the way out of the room.

"Mah Zah, we were wondering if maybe you knew something about created life and how their minds were formed." Lex said as they walked.

The little dog let loose a few small yips, then waited as G picked her up and perched her on his shoulder.

Once Mah Zah was comfortably in place, she barked a response to Lex's question.

"She says that she knows some things about that, but a lot of her more complex magic won't work here." G translated.

"And there's no way that you could go *there* to have Mah Zah perform the spell. Even if I could manage to make a portal, which I can't, your physical body probably couldn't survive in that realm anyway." Paul said thoughtfully.

"Maybe it's something that Lucky could recreate with his magic." Lex said slowly.

"I'm not really that clear on how the mimicry works. I guess that's possible." Paul said uncertainly.

Ginh Zah meowed her contribution to their conversation.

"If we had to, Ginh Zah says that we could enact the Oculus Demonus, then Lucky could witness the spell being cast by demons in a hell dimension without having to go there. Maybe that would be enough for him to be able to mimic it." Paul said uncertainly.

"Yeah, um, let's put that down around plan 'C' or 'D' on the list. That sounds like a lot of things could go wrong a lot of different ways." Lex said uncomfortably.

"Agreed." Paul said easily.

"Do you happen to already know the charm spells, or will we need to get copies of them before we leave?" Lex asked cautiously.

"The ones I use have their text within their diagrams, so there's no guesswork, I remember them." Paul said seriously, then explained, "If I need to do something else, I usually just take those base spells and make the changes I need to them."

"If I can get an idea of how the spells are constructed, I think that I should be able to craft something that will work for what we're trying to do." Lex said thoughtfully.

"Maybe you'll find something in here that'll help." G said as they walked into the immense library.

"How could we have this here all this time without me knowing about it?" Paul asked as he looked around the immense room in wonder.

"Don't get your hopes up. For as many books as we have, I have never found a single thing in here that I wanted to read." G said frankly.

"Are these all magic books?" Lucky asked in wide-eyed fascination.

"Some of them probably are. But most of the ones that I've seen are the family histories of people I've never heard of or catalogues of facts about places that I've never been." G said seriously.

"It's a graveyard of useless information." Lex quietly added.

"These all look the same. Are they encyclopedias?" Paul asked as he walked to a wall of identical books.

"Those are death records, I think. I looked at them once and never really looked at them again." G said honestly.

"Numerology." Paul said in dawning realization.

"What about it?" G asked curiously.

"This storehouse of forgotten knowledge could be mined for quite a few statistical enchantments. We're not supposed to *read* it. We might mess it up. The power is in the organization and the sheer volume of the physically rendered data." Paul said seriously.

"Nobody in our house uses numerology." G said dubiously.

"Nobody in our house is a *master* of numerology. But all of us use it to some degree, it can be accessed by most basic practitioners." Paul reminded him.

"Yeah. And something like this isn't set up for a person who uses numerology as their primary magic. It's here so that the people who live here never have to worry about their numerology spells falling flat." Lex said seriously.

"Hey! Wait a minute. Aren't you supposed to automatically be on my side?" G asked playfully.

"Why would you think that?" Lex asked curiously, obviously taking G's playful comment more seriously than intended.

"I'm just saying that you used to *be* me. I thought we'd automatically think the same." G said uncertainly.

"Do you remember Obby?" Lex asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Of course." G immediately responded.

"Is he exactly like Shawn?" Lex asked in a leading tone.

"No. Not even close." G said frankly.

"I may be *like* you in some ways, but I'm *not* you. I am myself." Lex explained.

"I'm not disagreeing with you; I was just saying that it seemed reasonable to think that you'd automatically see my point of view." G said seriously.

"Do you think that this is *not* a magical reservoir?" Lex asked slowly.

"I'm not disagreeing with that. I guess it just seems weird to me because it's always been here and I've always known about it, but I never realized it's true purpose." G said frankly.

"Do you know if we have a library where we might have some magical books that could help us with Zah Zah or making a charm?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"There might be something in the back of Dad's study, but I've never really looked through his book collection. I just asked him when I needed something." G said honestly.

"Yeah. I'm not aware of any magic books around here except the ones that G brought into the house, like those grimoires that he likes to translate." Lex added.

"Where to next?" Paul asked as they filed out of the library.

"Snack?" G asked uncertainly.

"Now you're talking." Paul said happily.

"Do you think Aunt Beth will let us have something this close to dinner?" Lucky asked cautiously.

"There's one way to find out." Paul said confidently.

"What should I do with this?" Lex asked as he hefted the awkwardly big toolbox.

"Bring it." G said simply, then explained, "We can leave it in the kitchen until we're ready to go."

"Turn it and I'll help you." Lucky quietly offered.

"I can be bigger if I need to be." Lex reminded him.

"Or you can let me help you." Lucky persisted.

Rather than argue, Lex set down the toolbox and turned it so that Lucky could easily take one side of the handhold.

"With all the magic and familiars and stuff that we have access to, it blows me away that we still have to carry things." Paul chuckled.

"My illusions can't pick things up, so my magic wouldn't be much help for something like this." G said frankly.

"I might be able to summon a demon big enough to carry the toolbox, but it would take so much magic and such a force of will that carrying it myself would be easier." Paul said consideringly.

"So Mah Zah and Ginh Zah couldn't do it?" Lucky asked curiously.

"They probably could, but they're my generals. I wouldn't give them that kind of menial task unless there was no other way to get the job done." Paul said seriously.

Ginh Zah let loose a meow to inject her point of view.

"She says that in her own realm, it wouldn't be much of a chore, but she doubts if she and Mah Zah could manage to carry that thing in this realm." Paul said frankly.

"Does it really weaken them that much?" Lex quietly asked.

"Yeah. Probably about the same as we'd be weakened if we went to their realm." Paul said honestly.

Mah Zah barked her contribution to the conversation.

"Except for me, maybe. We'll just have to wait to see how much I can tolerate, since I'm a Cambion, Mah Zah says that it could actually make me stronger, there's no way to know until I can visit." Paul said uncomfortably.

"Lex, a little bit ago you mentioned that spellcasting in hell is plan 'D'. Do you have anything in mind yet for plan 'A'?" G asked curiously.

Before Lex could answer, Lucky quickly said, "If we could find a spell to create a person who can think and feel and, you know, really be a person, then we could look at Zah Zah's base spell and fix whatever I did wrong and make her right."

"You did a *fantastic* job for someone working on his own without any examples to follow. The rest of us will help you find a way to even out her moods and make her safe to be around people." Lex said confidently.

Lucky held Zah Zah a little more tightly as he struggled to believe.

* * * * *

"I was wondering where all of you had gotten off to." Beth said as the group filed into the kitchen.

"We were hoping to get a snack..." G began to say, then noticed the platters of fried snack foods and bowls of dips.

"D said that he'd see to your dinner tonight, so I thought that you'd need a little something to tide you over." Beth said with a self-satisfied grin.

"My mom would *never* let us eat something like this." Lucky said as he stared at the food with wide eyes.

"Then don't tell her." Beth said simply as she handed him an empty plate.

The boys lined up behind Lucky, and seemed to be on the verge of scooting him out of their way if he didn't move fast enough.

* * * * *

Most of the next few minutes were dedicated to devouring every last remnant of the snack feast that Beth had provided.

As the boys were finishing, the sound of a phone interrupted. Beth, Paul, G, and Lucky all checked their phones while Lex patted his pockets, momentarily forgetting that he didn't have one.

After a moment to look at the screen, Lucky answered, "Hi Mom."

"Were you wanting to put that toolbox on the train?" Beth quietly asked as she stepped away from Lucky, to afford him privacy.

"Yeah. Is the rest of our stuff already there?" Paul asked curiously as he followed.

"I think so, but you'll have to ask your father to be sure. Either way, set it on the back porch until you're ready to go." Beth said frankly before walking to the stroller to check on Kay.

"Dad always gets things loaded way early. His magic is good for that kind of a job." G said honestly as he took the other end from Lex to help him relocate the toolbox to the porch.

"What should we do until Dad is ready?" Paul asked cautiously.

"We could call Teek." G said simply as he set his side of the toolbox down.

"Yeah. That sounds like a good idea, but what made you think of that?" Paul asked curiously.

"When Lucky's phone rang, I wondered who could be calling and that's the first person who came to mind." G said honestly as he led the way back to the kitchen.

"We should wait for Lucky before we call him. Him and Lenn have become really good friends since Lucky got his phone." Paul said seriously.

"Isn't it the middle of the night there?" Lex asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, G said, "It's a little bit late, but it's Friday night. It shouldn't be a problem."

"How do you think he'll react to getting a new cousin?" Lex asked timidly.

"He's half a world away from us, so I can't see any reason for him to be emotionally invested in it." G said frankly

* * * * *

"What's going on?" Lucky asked as he crossed the kitchen to join the rest of the boys at the doorway to the back porch.

"Nothing. We were just waiting for you to finish your call. Is your mom and Star okay?" G asked casually.

"Yeah. Star's being all weird, saying that she misses me and stuff. She never used to talk to me or anything while I was there with her, so I don't know why she cares so much about it now." Lucky said honestly.

"It's probably just a sister thing." Paul assured him.

Lucky nodded, then said, "I told Mom that I was a Child of the Sun."

"What'd she have to say to that?" Lex asked curiously.

"She said, 'That's nice, Honey'." Lucky said in a disturbingly good imitation of her.

"Then I guess that means it's something that you don't have to be too worried about." G said simply, then glanced at Beth for confirmation of his assumption.

She gave a slight shrug in response.

"We were thinking about calling Lenn before it gets too much later. How do you feel about that?" Lex asked curiously.

"Yeah! This is about the time that I usually call him anyway, so he's probably expecting me." Lucky said as he once again retrieved his phone from his pocket.

"Do you want to do a conference call?" G asked the group uncertainly.

"Lex doesn't have a phone of his own yet. Why don't we just use the speaker phone?" Paul asked curiously.

"Do you know how to do that, Lucky?"

"Do what?"

"Speakerphone."

"Oh, yeah. I did it by accident a few times. It sure is loud." Lucky said frankly.

"Yeah. Do you want to call Lenn and put him on speakerphone so that we can all talk to him?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Go to the parlor if you're going to be using the speakerphone. I don't want for you to disturb Kay when she's comfortable like this." Beth said firmly.

"Okay. Let's go." G said as he led the way out of the kitchen.

"Which parlor are we going to?" Lucky asked curiously.

"If it's ever a parlor besides the green one, I'll let you know." G said frankly.

"Do you know where that is?" Lex asked with a grin.

"Yeah. I think so." Lucky said slowly, then with a smile he asked, "You don't want me to tell, do you?"

"You've figured it out?" G asked with surprise.

"Almost, I think. By the time we get there, I'll probably know where it is." Lucky said seriously.

"I have a feeling that what you're saying makes more sense than it sounds like." Paul said uncertainly.

"Uh huh." Lucky confirmed, then gave a boyish giggle as he cuddled Zah Zah close to his chest.

Paul wanted to ask more, but was resolved to the fact that answers were likely not going to be forthcoming, however, new questions likely were. All in all, he decided to leave things be for the time being.

* * * * *

"Hi Lenn, I'm at Paul and G's house, I'm living here now. They're here with me on speakerphone." Lucky said happily.

"*I was wondering why I hadn't heard from anyone in so long.*" Lenn said frankly.

"G and I got selected for a work study project at school, and I guess Lucky was getting ready to move." Paul explained.

"And while all that was going on, I kinda accidentally made a copy of myself and brought him to life." G said timidly.

"His name is Lex." Lucky helpfully added.

"And he's here with us if you want to talk to him." Paul said encouragingly.

"*You've got a new person who you just created there with you, right now? Are you keeping him?*" Lenn asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. He's our brother now." Paul said simply.

"Or cousin, depending on who you ask." G added seriously.

"We're keeping him. He's one of us, just like you are." Lucky declared.

"*I am?*" Lenn cautiously asked.

"Absolutely." Paul confirmed.

G nodded, then explained, "This is the best that we can do, with the way things are right now. But the next time someone in the family gets married or buried, we'll all get together again and spend every minute of it that we can together."

"*This may not be the way I want for things to be, but it's still better than being completely alone with no one to talk to.*" Lenn said frankly.

"Hi Lenn, this is Lex. Just so you know, I have G's memories from before we were two separate people. That means that I know who you are, even if you've never met me before. You don't have to explain things to me. I don't know how you feel about that. I don't even know how you *should* feel. Anyway, what I was thinking is that if you need to talk to someone with a different point of view that I've got one... you know, not being born and like that." Lex stammered uncomfortably.

"*Um, yeah. I don't need to talk about anything right now, but I'll keep that in mind.*" Lenn said cautiously.

"I'm sure Dad will be getting Lex his own phone before long, so don't be surprised if he calls you on his own sometime." G hurried to add.

"*That'd be fine. It'll be nice to have another person to talk to.*" Lenn said sincerely.

"How are things going for you? Any news from your dad?" Lucky asked curiously.

"*Not really. Nothing's happened. But I think we're getting along better than we did. Even though we've still got a way to go, we're heading in the right direction.*" Lenn said consideringly.

"That's great, Lenn. I'm glad things are working out for you." Paul said happily, then cautiously asked, "What about the other thing? You haven't had any reputation problems, have you?"

There was a sound of laughter over the speakerphone, then Lenn responded, "*No. I haven't even thought about it in weeks.*"

"Then you need to be extra careful. Temptation likes to come at you strongest when you think you've got it beat." Paul said seriously.

"I honestly haven't been putting myself into a position where I have a chance to give in to temptation, but I'll try to keep that in mind."

"Just remember, day one may be tough, but day one hundred is more dangerous because that's when you're most likely to let your guard down." Paul said seriously.

"How do you know so much about it?" Lenn asked curiously.

"I grew up around a lot of damaged people making bad decisions. Now that I'm outside of it, I can look back and see patterns." Paul said seriously.

"*Lucky, how are you getting along, being in a new place, away from your family? Is it hard for you?*" Lenn asked, obviously ready to shift the conversation in another direction.

"We've been too busy for me to miss them much yet. Maybe I'll do it later, when I have more time." Lucky said frankly.

"*Remember that if you ever get lonely that you've got a cousin in South Lanarkshire who cares about how you're doing.*" Lenn said seriously.

"Mungo?" Lucky asked with an impish grin.

"*Me, you little arse!*" Lenn barked, then broke into laughter.

"It's great to hear you laugh, Lenn." G said sincerely.

"*It's nice to be able to.*" Lenn said honestly, then added more quietly, "*I'm really looking forward to the next time that all of us can be together. I'm counting on you lot to be ready for a big party*."

"We will be, at least for as much of a party as we'll be able to manage with all the parents and everyone around us making sure that we don't get into trouble." Paul said sourly.

"*I know it sounds daft coming from me, but I don't think you need to get into trouble to have fun. Some music or a good movie, maybe a bonfire would be all it would take.*" Lenn said distantly.

"That sounds really nice, Lenn. No matter when it is or where, we'll plan on doing that." G said firmly, almost as a vow.

Paul, Lex, and Lucky were all silently nodding their agreement.

"*I'm going over to my dad's tomorrow. He's wanting for us to go to the coast... I'm not sure why. At this time of year, it's going to be cold and miserable, probably insanely windy too.*" Lenn said speculatively, then continued, "*But he wants us to do something together. That alone should make it worth it.*"

"We're about to leave on a trip with our dad. In fact, we're going to have to hang up soon so that we can meet him." Paul said frankly.

"*Where will you be going?*" Lenn asked curiously.

"I don't know. They won't tell me." Paul said dejectedly.

There was a laugh audible over the speakerphone, then Lenn said, "*That sounds like something that's going to be a lot of fun.*"

"Even if it's as dreary as autumn on the Scottish coast, I'm sure that we'll still find some way to have fun with it." G said frankly.

"*I suppose it's less about where you go and more about the company you keep.*" Lenn said speculatively.

"I think you're right." Paul said warmly.

"We've got to go now. We shouldn't keep Dad waiting." G said seriously.

"*I hope your trip turns out to be a grand adventure... the good kind.*" Lenn finished with a chuckle under his words.

"Yours too." G immediately responded.

"Remember to call us if you need anything at all." Paul urgently added.

"Yeah. Even if there's not anything we can do to help, we can at least care and stuff." Lucky interjected.

"It was nice to officially meet you Lenn. Hopefully we'll get to visit in person really soon." Lex said sincerely.

"Boys? Are you ready?" D asked from the parlor doorway.

"*Go now and have your fun. Let me know all about it when you get back.*" Lenn said quickly.

"Tell us how yours went too." Lucky hurriedly responded.

"*You've got yourself a deal.*" Lenn promised, then quickly added, "*Goodbye, everyone*. *Goodbye, Uncle D.*"

"Goodbye!" All the boys and D responded in unison.

There was a long moment of silence before Lucky picked up his phone and ended the call.

"That was Lenn." G quietly told his father.

"I had assumed so." D said honestly.

"We left a toolbox on the back porch that's going to need to go on the train." Paul quickly added.

"Beth already told me. It's on its way there now." D assured him.

"Can you tell us about what we're going to be doing?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Not just yet. This is one of those things that's better left as a surprise." D assured him.

"Is there anything else we need to do before we go?" G asked cautiously.

"Normally, I'd have you change into more comfortable clothes, but I suppose that with things being as they are, you'll have to wait until we're on the train for that." D said resignedly.

Lex and Lucky shared a look with each other, then simultaneously allowed their illusionary clothing to fall away, revealing their casual clothes underneath.

"That kind of makes me wish that I had illusionary clothing of my own. It looks really handy." D said appreciatively.

"If we can get the spells worked out, we might be able to give you some." Lex said honestly.

D looked at Lex with surprise, then after a moment to think about it, he said, "If you do, I'll wear it proudly."

"So, is that it? Do we have everything we need before we go?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Almost." D said, then looked the group over before announcing, "Considering what each of us have been through, I feel like it's only right that we celebrate by doing something especially memorable to mark the occasion."

The excitement in the room compounded as the boys waited for D to tell them what they were going to be doing.

"That being said, our celebration will *not* absolve you of your school responsibilities. I don't know what type of commitments you've made, but be aware, I'm counting on you to keep them." D said firmly.

"Can I still drive the train with you?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"Yes. There's nothing I'd like more." D said with a warm smile at the boy.

"While you're doing that, I can be pumping Paul for information about how to make charms and stuff." Lex said teasingly.

"How about we put our heads together and see what we can come up with?" Paul asked encouragingly.

"What does that leave for me to do?" G asked cautiously.

"You could feed wood into the boiler." D suggested.

"Can't you do that with your magic?" G asked uncertainly.

"I *can*. But if you don't have anything else to do, it would be a way to pass the time." D said frankly.

"Or..." Paul interjected, "...you could help me and Lex brainstorm his clothing enchantment. To do this right, we're probably going to need one person to be dedicated to the illusion." Paul said seriously.

"He's right. Even though I can do the illusion myself, I might not be able to do my best work while I'm also concentrating on making the charms." Lex reluctantly admitted.

"Good. Now that that's settled, let's head out!" D said cheerfully.

The boys looked at each other, silently asking if there was anything more that any of them needed to do before they left.

Lucky was the first one to move, but his action prompted the others to immediately follow.

Chapter 15

"Lex, you might not want to take Zephyr out where he can be seen." G cautiously warned him.

"Dad, do you know if it's safe for us to do magic in front of the workmen?" Paul asked curiously.

"Most likely it is, but it's always better to err on the side of caution in such a situation. Just hold on for a few minutes and you can let him out at the train platform." D said carefully.

"So everyone else can have their helpers out while I have to hide mine whenever we're around anyone?" Lex asked to verify his understanding of the situation.

"Wow! Life's not fair. Who would have guessed?" Paul asked with an impressive amount of sarcasm.

"If Zephyr is wearing an illusion already, can't you just change his illusion to be something that you can take outside with you?" Lucky asked curiously.

Paul and G looked at each other, almost appearing to be speaking telepathically.

Lex turned to the tiny horse on his shoulder and quietly asked, "Would you like to be an otter or a hedgehog?"

In response, Zephyr began to fill out, becoming bigger and drastically changing his shape, despite his overall coloring remaining mostly the same.

"Um, Lex. It looks like your horse is melting." G said slowly, in case Lex hadn't noticed.

"I think Zephyr is modifying his illusion from inside the spell." Lex said uncertainly.

"I don't think you can do that." G said cautiously.

"Actually, I know you can, because... *I* can. This isn't much different from me changing from my 'G' form to my 'Cousin Lex' form. Since most of Zephyr's appearance is an illusion, he should be able to change it however he wants to."

"And he wants to be a melting furry blob?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Give him a minute. He's working on it." Lex chided, then looked to his shoulder and encouragingly said, "Go ahead boy, take all the time you need to get it just the way you want it."

The furry blob raised its head to reveal a pair of soulful droopy bloodshot eyes.

"Hey! That's wonderful!" Lex said happily.

"What is it? What did he do?" Paul carefully asked.

"He's turned himself into a Basset Hound. It's perfect!" Lex said happily.

"I don't think Basset Hounds are usually that small." G cautiously offered.

"We'll just say that he's a Teacup Basset. Unless we're talking to a dog expert, there shouldn't be a problem." Lex said confidently.

"Actually, he's probably right. There are enough miniature and teacup breeds of dogs that no one should have a problem believing it. For all I know, there may be such a thing actually running around in the mundane world." D said as he gestured for the boys to start walking again.

"Do you think Zah Zah can do that too?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I can think of arguments to explain why she could *and* why she couldn't. I guess the only way to know for sure is for her to try." G said frankly.

"She doesn't understand what Zephyr did and how he did it." Lucky said honestly.

"Zephyr adjusted his outer illusion. His was a horse and now it's a dog. Zah Zah's illusion is the gentle cuddly kitten that she uses to lure people in." Paul said with a smile.

"When I make her, she does most of the illusion herself. But she doesn't know if she can change it from what she's already got set." Lucky said carefully.

"Maybe she can't." Lex said simply, then explained, "But if you think about it, she can already pass as a natural creature, so there's no reason she should *have to* change. If she can find a way to do it, that's great. But if she can't, it really doesn't cause a problem."

The drooping mass of loose skin and fur on Lex's shoulder made a quiet whinny which was a bit of a surprise.

"Can you make any dog sounds?" Lex asked hesitantly.

Zephyr, in his dog form, shook his head, which caused his long ears to flop and slap against his neck and head as he did so.

"So Zephyr isn't going to be able to spend much time around mundane people. He can pass at a distance, but he can't be in their company for very long." Lex said to the group as they walked.

"Was that ever a real possibility?" G asked curiously.

"There's always the chance that Curtis or someone will come over, but that doesn't seem too likely." Lex said frankly.

"It probably would be best if you didn't have any of your animal helpers hanging around too much when we have visitors." D said seriously.

"Nazzy and Vinda are okay with Mah Zah and Ginh Zah." G automatically defended.

"So are Filipe and Arjun." Paul quickly added.

"It wouldn't hurt anything if Corabeth saw Zephyr." Lex quietly added.

"I wasn't saying that you couldn't ever let the animal helpers out. I was just saying that as a general rule, outside a select group of trusted friends, that we should limit who sees them. Even among witches, we're talking about some non-standard high-level magics being used." D cautiously explained.

"From what I hear, most witches don't do much more than an occasional spell to make things easier in their day-to-day lives. The way we live every day would probably be seen as an excessive flaunting of power to them." G said frankly.

"It sounds to me like one of those situations where people get jealous and make up stories until they finally end up storming the place with torches and pitchforks." Lex said, sounding casual, despite his startling words.

"You don't really think that would happen, do you?" Paul asked cautiously.

"How about we not find out?" D suggested.

"Yeah. That sounds like a way to go." Paul agreed.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of walking, G cautiously asked his father, "Are you all caught up on your work for the weekend?"

"Yes. I touched on each thing that I needed to be updated on, took action when necessary, and I'll check back on Monday and make adjustments, if needed." D said simply.

"That's all you have to do?" Paul asked with surprise.

"That's all I have to do *this time*." D said seriously, then explained, "Any one of a number of things could have cropped up to prevent me from going with you this weekend, it's just fortunate for us that they didn't."

"So it wasn't your fantastic planning that made this possible?" G teased.

"Actually, it was." D said simply, then explained, "If I hadn't structured things this way to begin with, then us taking an impromptu weekend would be out of the question. Thanks to diligent planning, the determining factors were able to fall into place."

"So you had your chess board all set up and the gambit laid out, all ready for you to execute?" G cautiously speculated.

"Exactly." D happily confirmed.

"Uncle D? Do you think you'll have time to show me some more tricks that I can use on Zah Zah?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"Yes. Once we get the engine up to speed, you and I should have some time to talk and we should be able to try a few things." D said pleasantly.

Lucky seemed to have a little extra bounce in his step at the prospect of having his 'Uncle D' all to himself for a while.

* * * * *

"G, you know how it works. Your backpacks and whatever else Beth decided to pack for you is on your beds in the sleeper car. There will be food and drinks available in the club car, but remember that I'm planning on us having dinner shortly after our arrival. Don't fill up on snacks." D told the group as they crested the hill that overlooked the train station.

"So, do you want us to use the time on the train to get our school stuff caught up?" G asked to confirm.

"If you did, I would consider it a constructive use of your time." D said seriously.

"It's possible that the things that Lex and Lucky are working on will take us the whole trip to figure out." Paul said frankly.

"And even if it doesn't, I've still got a Sorcery project that Lex could help me with." G said honestly.

"It sounds like no matter what, we'll find a way to fill the time." Paul finally concluded.

"Good. Because if you can get your things resolved on the trip there, we'll be able to enjoy our time together that much more." D said confidently.

"How does Mom feel about us doing all of this without her?" Paul asked curiously.

"She thinks that after all the changes we've gone through in such a short period of time, that we need something like this to help us bond and become a family and all that sort of thing. She thinks us having 'boy time' and her and Kay having some 'girl time' will contribute to that." D said frankly, then admitted, "I just wanted to do it because it sounds like fun."

"It does." Paul agreed.

"One other thing." D said as he suddenly stopped.

All the boys halted their progress toward the station and waited for his next words.

"For the rest of the weekend, you can be yourselves. You don't have to hide your magic." D said happily as he made a grand gesture toward the train.

All around the little station building, things began to shift and move, each performing some necessary function to support their departure.

"Hang on, Zephyr. I'm going full sized." Lex announced as he began to grow.

Not to be outdone, Zephyr reverted back to his traditional 'horse' form.

"Zah Zah? Do you want to be yourself?" Lucky cautiously asked.

The cat-creature made a screechy hiss in response as Lucky put her down.

In a flash, Zah Zah appeared to back-flip, twist and transform all-in-one lithe movement.

The fluffy little kitten that Lucky had been carrying was now a scribbled nightmare, which to be honest, was more representative of her nature.

"You can go demon if you want." G told Paul quietly.

"Nah. I only feel like going demon when I'm doing powerful magic. I'm fine like this for now." Paul said honestly.

A 'meow' from Paul's shoulder drew his attention.

"Yeah. That's probably a good idea." Paul said in agreement.

"What's that?" G asked curiously.

"Ginh Zah was just saying that she and Mah Zah should go home for a while so that they won't be too weakened if we need them for something important later." Paul said seriously.

"Right. You can always call them back if we need their help." G confirmed.

Mah Zah let loose a yipping little bark before jumping off G's shoulder.

"We'll call you back later, when there's something fun for you to do." G assured her.

Ginh Zah yowled a long phrase in cat, then waited for a response.

After a moment to consider, Paul finally said, "I'll check back with you later to see what you've found."

A slight blur in reality appeared and both familiars immediately stepped through.

"What was Ginh Zah talking about?" G asked curiously.

"She just said that she was going to talk to some people about Zah Zah to see if they had any suggestions of things we can try." Paul answered seriously.

"That's good thinking. I wouldn't know of anyone around here to talk to about something like that." G said honestly.

"I think that Mr. Howlen has been the most helpful person we've found so far." Lex said consideringly.

"Get aboard and get yourselves settled in. Lucky will sound the whistle when we're ready to leave." D said as they stopped beside the passenger car.

"Do you happen to know where that toolbox went that we left on the back porch?" Lex cautiously asked.

"It's in the club car. It looked to me like something that you might have a use for on the way there." D said frankly.

"I'm hoping that between us, we'll be able to come up with a usable charm." Lex said frankly.

"Just keep after it and don't get discouraged. Remember that the most valuable lessons are learned in our defeats, not our victories." D said sagely.

"Winston Churchill?" G asked his father curiously.

"Susan Lucci, I think." D said uncertainly.

After a long moment of consideration, Paul reluctantly admitted, "I don't know who that is."

"It doesn't matter. All I'm saying is to keep trying and be aware that sometimes a failure can teach you more than a success. Don't be discouraged that something didn't work. Figure out *why* it didn't work." D said seriously.

"Got it." G said confidently, then thought to ask, "Is there anything you need for us to get done while we're *en route*?"

"Nope. I've got it all under control. Just do what you can of your schoolwork to get it out of the way." D said confidently, then glanced to Lucky and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah." Lucky answered immediately, then looked down and said, "Come on, Zah Zah."

The cat-beast with the too-human eyes looked at D distrustfully, almost as if measuring his worth.

"Do you want for her to put her kitten illusion back on before we go?" Lucky thought to ask.

"I just want for everyone to be comfortable. If she wants to wear her illusion, she can. If she doesn't, that's fine too. And if you two want to put your heads together to come up with a new illusion for her, I don't see any problem with that either. We should have plenty of time, no matter what you decide to do." D said reasonably.

"You wanna?" Lucky asked happily, then before Zah Zah could react, Lucky scooped her up and started toward the train's engine.

"Remember that even though travelling by train may feel like we've gone a century back in time, we're not trying to make things uncomfortable or inconvenient for anyone. If you need anything, I'll be a phone call away." D said reasonably.

"Come on!" Lucky called urgently.

"You heard the boss. We're leaving." D said with a grin as he started walking toward the engine.

The boys watched as D hurried forward to join Lucky and Zah Zah.

"Since Dad is using his magic, he could be ready to go in a minute or two." G said as he ushered Paul and Lex aboard.

* * * * *

"Where's the toolbox?" Lex asked as he looked around.

"Dad said he left it in the club car, that's the car ahead of us. If you're needing to change clothes or anything like that, your personal items will be in the sleeper car, that's the one behind us." G said seriously.

"If you guys don't mind, I'd like to get started on my charm work. If you'll just give me a diagram and a little push in the right direction, I can probably take care of the rest of it myself." Lex said frankly.

"Let's go up to the club car. We have tables in there that will be excellent for diagramming. You'll have plenty of room to work." G explained.

"So, what's this car for?" Paul asked as he looked at the rather ordinary train car, with the seats all facing forward.

"It's good for reading or just sitting quietly and watching the scenery go by. If you're wanting to talk or play a game or something like that, it's usually better to

go to the club car. Think of it as this car being for solo pursuits and the club car being for group activities." G carefully explained.

"Come on." Lex said as he started moving toward the club car.

"Can you tell me where we're going yet?" Paul asked as they followed.

"No." G said simply, then explained, "The truth is, I'm not sure what Dad has planned. Going this direction, the track forks a couple times before it loops back on itself. We could actually be going a couple different places. We might be going to any or all of them before the weekend's over."

"Watch your step through here." Lex said as he stepped through the connecting door from the passenger car.

"It's not so bad when we're still like this, but it's a good idea to always be careful when changing cars. It's really easy to misstep and lose your footing. Spending the weekend with a sprained ankle probably wouldn't be much fun." G said as he followed.

Paul was careful as he followed Lex and G, making sure to step *exactly* in their footsteps.

* * * * *

Once they were all in the club car, G happily said, "I don't know for sure where we're going, but wherever Dad is taking us, I know it's going to be great, so there's nothing to worry about."

"Paul. Can you show me a diagram so that I can get started? I really want to get as much of this done as I can before we get to wherever we're going." Lex asked hopefully.

"Sure. I'll go ahead and give you the diagram to install the enchantment into a suitable vessel. That's the tricky one. The rest of the spells that go into it are just typical castings, just about like what you'd expect." Paul said as he gestured to a tabletop.

As he did, the entire top of the table began to glow with precise drawings filled with writing.

"Tricky? Someone could have spent a lifetime developing a diagram like this." Lex said slowly as he examined all the intricate details.

"Yeah. Then I copied it and did things with it that they probably never thought of. Now you and Lucky are going to take what I've done with it and you're going to make it do even more." Paul said frankly.

"First we'll have to see if I have any aptitude for enchanting a charm. It *feels* like I should be able to do it, but I won't know for sure until I actually try." Lex said seriously.

"Sounds like a plan." Paul said happily, then continued more seriously, "If you have any questions, I'll help you if I can. But I think you should be able to figure everything out just by following the text in the different sections of the diagram. Power links just like you'd expect, and the potentialities are all declared in standard ways."

"Yeah. Give me a chance to look this over, then I may try a few things." Lex said absently as he fought to make sense of what he was looking at.

"I know that you probably already know this, but I just want to say it to be sure that we're all on the same page." G said in prelude, then continued, "Here in a few minutes, the whistle should sound in two short bursts. That'll mean that we're about to leave. Paul and I are going to go back and make sure that all our belongings are secure for travel."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Lex asked as he looked up from the diagram.

"No. We've got this." G assured him, then thought to add, "Don't worry if we're not back right away. This will be the first time all day that we've had a chance to be alone together."

"And you're going to the sleeper car... I get it." Lex assured him.

"No. We just need a little snuggle time. It's been a long day." G told him frankly.

"Go on. Besides, from the look of it, I think this is going to keep me occupied for quite a while." Lex said honestly.

"We'll be back before you know it." G said as he turned to leave.

"Have fun." Paul said with a grin as he happily followed.

"Yeah. You, too." Lex chuckled after him.

Once Paul and G had passed through the door to the passenger car, Lex focused on Zephyr and said, "Let's see if we can make a charm."

* * * * *

As G had predicted, the whistle sounded in two short bursts before the train lurched forward to begin its journey.

Lex and Zephyr carefully studied the spell diagram, trying to discover just how it functioned, so that Lex could develop something similar to accomplish his goals.

While Lex studied a passage of text which defined the pre-enchantment state of the vessel, Zephyr walked around on the diagram, apparently getting a feel for where everything was and how things related to each other.

Zephyr let loose a little 'neigh' that drew Lex's attention.

"What have you got there, boy?" Lex asked as he looked away from the text that he had been studying.

A stamp of his right forehoof was Zephyr's immediate answer.

After a moment to get the gist of the passage of text Zephyr had indicated, Lex cautiously said, "We're planning on manifesting a base then covering it with an illusion. This is just a standard enchantment definition."

Zephyr stamped his hoof again, seeming to be a little more insistent this time.

"I take it that there's something about the definition phase that I'm not seeing." Lex said slowly.

Zephyr went up on his hind legs and waved his forehooves in the air before suddenly reverting to his classical 'nuggle' form, being made entirely of mist.

"This is a basic spell. Your elemental nature shouldn't play any part... wait. That's the lie, isn't it? When I didn't specify a form for you, you manifested on your own from the pathways etched into place by my animal form and the ancient folklore." Lex said speculatively.

Zephyr began to change shape and color and seemed to transform into something *else*. While what he became could never be mistaken for a seahorse, at the same time, one could easily detect elements of both the sea and of a horse in its makeup.

"Zephyr?" Lex asked uncertainly.

The green and black horse beast made a wheezy sound as foul toxic fog spewed forth from its mouth.

As Lex began to slowly back away, Zephyr's eyes flashed red for an instant, then he seemed to suddenly revert back to his usual self.

Lex froze in place, not understanding what he had just seen.

Zephyr, now completely back in his nuggle form, illusion and all, went back to the spell diagram and stamped his hoof on the passage of text again.

"A benevolent spellcasting will typically yield a benevolent result when not specified otherwise. But we can't assume that we know the intent of the person who will be taking up the charm. So in crafting our spell, we need to take possible intent into account, otherwise the charm that we assume we are creating may end up introducing a horrible evil into the world when it's turned to the wrong purpose." Lex said slowly and speculatively.

Zephyr bobbed his head in agreement with the analysis.

"It might be interesting to see what happens when you don't define it and see all the different ways the spell can manifest." Lex said speculatively.

Zephyr whinnied and shook his head forcefully to let his feelings about the suggestion be clearly known.

"I was just saying that it'd be interesting, I wouldn't actually do it." Lex hurried to assure him.

Zephyr looked at him dubiously for a moment, then went back to perusing the spell diagram.

* * * * *

"Isn't this amazing? The countryside is beautiful." Paul asked as he and G walked into the club car, now wearing their casual clothes.

"Is it?" Lex asked as he looked up from the spell diagram distractedly.

"I think there's a life lesson to be learned here." G said frankly, then explained, "You need to take time to enjoy the beauty around you or you might miss out on something really special."

Lex took a moment to look out the windows at the, admittedly beautiful, scenery as it passed by.

"Have you had any luck deciphering that diagram?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. But it's a lot more complicated than it looks." Lex said seriously.

"Honestly, it looks complicated as hell." G immediately declared.

"The funny thing is, our eyes can't even register the true complexity of these diagrams." Paul interjected.

"I'm beginning to realize that." Lex reluctantly admitted.

"Really?" G asked as he moved closer to see for himself.

"Complexity and precision are part of what makes the magic work. I mean, maybe the religious magic can work on *belief*, but from what I've been able to put together, witches need repetition, exact crafting and perfect execution along with the actual magic to make their spells turn out right." Paul said seriously.

"I was never worried too much about the theory behind it all before..." Lex quietly admitted.

"You're talking about me, aren't you?" G asked playfully.

"Kinda, yeah." Lex timidly admitted.

"That's what makes my wizard's light diagrams so useful. It's not just that I can call them up so quickly, but also that as long as I cast the spell correctly, the diagram will be perfect every time. The slightest imperfection can spoil the enchantment and even lead to a catastrophic miscast or an unintentional curse." Paul said instructively.

"Why didn't Mrs. Cualla ever warn us about that?" Lex asked curiously.

"I think it's because, if you goof it in class, most likely nothing too bad is going to happen. You don't get the really bad consequences unless you're really close to

grabbing the big payoff. She'd probably know if you were anywhere near doing something dangerous." Paul said frankly.

"So that's why the really good charms are so hard to come by? Not only because of the magical cost, but also because of the danger?" Lex asked speculatively.

"Right. And keep in mind that sometimes an enchantment will fail for no reason. I mean, you do everything exactly right, you can go back and double-check everything and you'll still end up paying the price. I can see how knowing that could make someone not look forward to going into work each day." Paul said honestly.

"Zephyr was telling me to be sure to declare the intent while we're casting, or it could flip our charm into a curse." Lex said thoughtfully.

"Can Zephyr talk to you?" G asked curiously.

"Not in words, but yeah. Pretty much." Lex said with an affectionate glance at his tiny companion.

"Well, he's right. Casting with ill intent can definitely cause a problem, but even after that, the person taking up the charm can unleash a curse if the charm was created without proper safeguards in place." Paul said seriously.

"I don't think that I can create a spell diagram as complex as yours. If I tried to do that with wizard's lights I'd probably still be casting it this time next week." Lex said honestly.

"If you can find something that I can draw on, I can make a permanent copy of the diagram that you can take with you and use as many times as you need." Paul said honestly.

"What about a tablecloth?" G suggested.

"You don't think Dad will mind, do you?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"No. But if he does, I'm pretty sure he can afford to buy another one if he feels like he *really* needs to." G said, obviously amused by the question.

"Where are the tablecloths?" Paul asked as he looked around.

"In the dining car." G said as he pointed toward the car in front of them.

"I thought we were going to eat in here, since we have tables and stuff." Paul said uncertainly.

"We *can* eat in here, but this is more like a hang-out spot where we can chat and play games. The dining car is just what it sounds like. It's a place where we can all sit down and enjoy a meal together." G explained.

"I know where the tablecloths are. I'll be right back." Lex said as he hurried toward the front of the car.

G and Paul watched him go, then turned in unison to look at the little horse, still standing on the spell diagram, looking back at them.

"You're keeping him on the right track, aren't you?" Paul asked in a strange, low voice.

Zephyr tilted his head slightly and seemed to be carefully considering. Finally, he gave a single nod in Paul's direction as he met his eyes.

"I didn't intentionally give you to him. You know that don't you?" Paul slowly asked, not sounding anything like his usual self.

Zephyr tilted his head again, and this time ended up looking away.

"You don't have any obligation to him... or to me, for that matter." Paul said frankly.

"Do you already know Zephyr from sometime before?" G asked uncertainly.

"We travelled along the same path for a time." Paul said cautiously.

Zephyr turned himself so that he was facing the door that Lex had passed through.

"Just remember, as an elemental, he may very well be immortal. A promise made to him carries different weight." Paul said carefully.

"Am I speaking to Paul right now?" G hesitantly asked.

"So you shall be." Paul answered, then looked at G strangely for a moment before asking, "What was I saying?"

"You were talking to Lex about tablecloths, I think." G said slowly.

"Oh. Yeah. Spell diagrams. Are you sure Dad won't care?" Paul asked uncomfortably.

"Yeah. I'm sure." G said confidently, then glanced at Zephyr, who was watching the door that Lex had passed through.

* * * * *

"Is this alright?" Lex asked as he held up a folded white tablecloth.

"That should be just fine. If you'll spread it out, I can make a clean version of the diagram for you." Paul said professionally.

"Come on up here, Zephyr. We need the table." Lex said as he indicated his shoulder.

As Zephyr began his gallop into the air in slow motion, Paul waved his hand and dispelled the previous version of the spell diagram.

As soon as he had a clear table to work with, Lex spread out the tablecloth.

"Before I start, would you like any of the formulae or spell texts to be filled in for you?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. I just need the structure. I'd really like to be able to tinker with the actual spell and make changes on the fly when I have an idea." Lex said frankly.

"Seeing you doing this makes me wish that I'd started out trying to create something new instead of altering other people's already created works." Paul quietly admitted.

"I don't think what I'm doing is that different. Maybe we're approaching it from different directions, but I think it's going to end up being about the same." Lex said frankly.

"I guess so." Paul reluctantly admitted, then thought to add, "Your way just feels more 'honest' to me."

"You're standing on the shoulders of giants. You haven't stolen their work, you've continued it." Lex said simply.

"Yeah. Okay. I can live with that." Paul said with a content smile.

"Let me get the Lapis and the brace out so that we'll be able to see what we're enchanting. I always like to have my target in sight for visualization's sake." Lex said seriously.

"Tell us if you need for us to do anything. Otherwise we're just here for the show." G said frankly.

"If you wouldn't mind, stay handy so I can ask you questions. I might even need one of your famous stone tablets at some point, just to *literally* spell it out for me." Lex said frankly.

"I don't think I want to be doing stone on a moving train. But I can make a writing surface for you whenever you want." Paul assured him.

"I'm going to see how much I can do before I have to ask for help." Lex said seriously.

"Well, if Lex doesn't need your help right now, I could use your opinion on my illusion for Sorcery class." G said hopefully.

"Are you guys alright for a while?" Paul asked Lex curiously.

"Yeah. I think Zephyr and I will have our hands and hooves full doing it, but we need to do this for ourselves. If we can manage to cobble something together, I may call on you to look it over before we do a test run." Lex said with a smile at the tiny horse on his shoulder.

"Sounds good. Yell if you need us." Paul said as he followed G a few tables away, where they could talk comfortably without having to worry about distracting Lex.

Chapter 16

"Paul! Can you give me the text of the diagram for the negative flow?" Lex asked loudly, to be heard a few tables away, over the sound of the train.

"Yeah. It's just a quasi-elemental shift. Easy-peasy." Paul called in return as a glossy whiteboard appeared with a detailed explanation of the spell.

"Thanks. I just wanted to be sure that I got the linkages straight." Lex responded.

"For every in there's an out, for every give there's a take." Paul carefully explained.

"I'll keep that in mind." Lex said loudly, then turned his full attention to the spell in front of him.

* * * * *

"It's just like I thought." He finally said, then touched one finger to the spell diagram on the tablecloth to add in the symbols of his formula.

Zephyr carefully looked over the addition, then bobbed his head in agreement.

"It looks like we've got the basic elements covered fairly well. Any of us can summon those. We've got the vessel objects for both enchantments and now we have a way to magically power it that should work in just about any circumstance." Lex mused aloud.

Zephyr vigorously shook his head to show his emphatic disagreement.

"Why not? What did I miss? If a mundane person puts it on, it will go inert. If a magical person puts it on, it will use their personal reservoir of magic. What other states are there to consider?"

Zephyr crossed the tabletop to the edge of the diagram, where the Lapis Lazuli and silver brace were sitting, waiting to be used.

Very carefully and deliberately, Zephyr put one forehoof into the brace, then looked expectantly at Lex.

"Duh! A part-time centaur should know better. There's no way the 'changey' will work on me if I don't rig it to account for a quadruped." Lex said slowly.

Zephyr looked him in the eyes for a moment, then took off in a slow-motion gallop toward G and Paul.

"You know, this would be a lot easier if you could just tell me what you were wanting to say." Lex said frankly.

Zephyr didn't respond or even alter his course.

Paul and G stopped what they were doing and watched as Zephyr silently approached.

"Did you need something? What's going on?" Paul asked hesitantly.

"You'll have to ask Zephyr. He's doing it all on his own." Lex said frankly.

G was obviously surprised by Zephyr's choice to fly to him and land on his shoulder.

"Hey. What are you doing there, Buddy?" Lex asked cautiously.

Zephyr turned and looked Lex in the eyes for a moment before purposefully looking down at the table between G and Paul.

"Is that Linnaeus?" Lex asked uncertainly.

While the Wizard's Light drawing *did* have multiple arms and legs, it was much thicker around the middle than Linnaeus and didn't have any of his more refined identifying features.

"Only in the most general sense. This is kind of a doodle that we were working on to help G with a project that he's trying to rig." Paul explained.

"I think that Zephyr wants for me to make adaptable clothes for your dodecapedal guy here." Lex said speculatively.

"I'm sure he'd appreciate that." G said hesitantly, then added, "But since he's a Hindu god, he can probably make whatever clothes he wants for himself."

"Yeah. But what if we rigged the changey so that it *could* adapt to Linnaeus or G's Hindu god? Wouldn't that be an awesome feature to include?" Lex asked with a smile.

"You mean like the makeup mirror in the car?" Paul asked curiously.

After a moment, Lex quietly admitted, "I don't see the connection."

"A feature that you don't need doesn't add value to your spell. If you're planning to have multi-armed, multi-legged creatures wearing your adaptable clothes, then

yeah, that's great. But if not, then any time or trouble you put into making your clothing adapt is all wasted." Paul said seriously.

"Yeah. If you don't use it, then it just makes your spell more complicated to cast with no benefit. It's bloat." G added.

"Hey, I'm with you. Zephyr's the one who's pushing for clothing that's adaptable for everyone." Lex said in his own defense.

After a long quiet moment listening to the clackity-clack of the train running down the tracks, Paul finally said, "It sounds to me like Zephyr may be thinking three steps ahead of us. He's not thinking about making something that's practical for your project or even to get you a better grade. I think he's planning on copyrighting your spell and living off the proceeds for years to come."

"What? Do you think that I won't be able to earn enough to keep hay on your plate?" Lex asked teasingly.

Zephyr flashed him a dubious sideways glance that was epic in its proportion before looking away.

"Ooh! Burn." Paul said with a sympathetic cringe followed by a laugh.

"Seriously. I'd really like your advice before we go any further." Lex asked firmly.

"I don't know. If you're going for the grade, I'd say to keep it bare-bones and simple. If you're looking at making charms your main focus after school, then Zephyr might be right. Something like this could get your name out there and open some doors for you with the more experienced practitioners of the craft." Paul said slowly.

"Dad already said that he'd like to have some clothes like this. To be honest, I'd like to have a jacket that I could always have with me, but dispel when I don't need it, especially on warm days." G said frankly.

"One of my lab partners, her name is Amelia, she gets six arms when she goes full out with her magic. I bet she'd appreciate having a coat to wear that she didn't have to remember to activate every time she transformed." Paul said speculatively.

"So even if the implementation turns out to be a little generic, the *idea* behind it holds enough appeal that we might be able to get Zephyr started on amassing his fortune." Lex said, finishing with a loving glance at his tiny companion.

"Paul, didn't you get a copyright or trademark or something on one of your spells?" G asked curiously.

"Yeah. It's not that big of a deal though. I just came up with a spell that translates your magical inner monologue into typing. It's pretty much the same thing as the numerology workbook answer spell, except that you use an enchanted keyboard instead of enchanted paper." Paul explained.

"So, have you made tons of money off of it yet?" Lex asked curiously.

"I've made some, but Dad's handling all of that for me. He said that for right now we're just going to build up some capital and wait for a good investment opportunity to come along." Paul said seriously.

"I feel like I'm being a slouch, just going to school and learning what I'm supposed to learn while you two are coming up with fantastic new inventions that will change the world." G said frankly.

"You're the heir to the Darroch estate, the oldest son. If you never earn a penny of your own money in your entire life, there's still no chance that you'll ever have to do without." Paul said as a statement of fact.

"You can take your time and learn your lessons the traditional way so that you can go into whatever field of study that you want to after school." Lex said in support of Paul's analysis.

"You guys are heirs too..." G began to feebly protest.

"You're the first. Whatever gets distributed, you get the first helping." Paul said simply.

"Which is just how it should be." Lex was quick to add.

"I don't think Dad sees it that way." G cautiously stated.

"He might not. He may see us as all being equal. I won't pretend to know what's going on in his head. I'm just saying that you were here before any of the rest of us. You get first dibs." Paul said firmly.

A whinny from Zephyr drew their attention down to the table and the generic diagram of the multi-armed and legged creature.

"Right. Back to work." Paul agreed.

"Do you guys want to help me rig the spell on the Lapis to allow the 'changey' to work on multi-limbed creatures?" Lex asked hopefully.

"Well, my first instinct is to say no, since I don't have any talent for charms. But you said 'rig', so it sounds like something that might end up helping me on my Sorcery project." G said honestly.

"And even if it doesn't, you'll at least be able to give your Hindu god a nice jacket to wear." Paul finished with a smile.

"I need to get the tablecloth..." Lex began to say when Paul held out a hand in that direction and the tablecloth flew directly to him.

"What the hell was that?!" G asked in surprise.

"Just a little bit of the psionic force thingy that I learned from Corabeth." Paul said frankly.

"It's beginning to worry me; how powerful you're getting." G said frankly.

"Beginning? You're kinda late to the party. Most of my classmates and lab partners are already freaked out by me." Paul said honestly.

"That doesn't bother you?" Lex asked curiously.

"No matter how things went, I was never going to be like them anyway. I didn't grow up like them and at the core of myself, I'm not the same as they are. I'm fundamentally different. The best way I can think of to handle it is to be who I am and try not to be a dick about it." Paul said as he handed the tablecloth to Lex.

"Give me a second to put this away and we'll help you." G said quickly.

"No. Please don't. If you'll explain what you're doing with the rigging here, it may end up coming into play with the 'changey' alterations I'm going to have to hardwire into the spell."

"Yeah. Okay. And maybe you can help me get this rigging sorted out. The way I've got it now, the movement is too robotic."

"Zephyr and I will be happy to help you with that."

* * * * *

"Did you feel that? We're slowing down." Paul said suddenly.

G and Lex both looked up from the diagrams of rigging that they had been working on for over an hour.

"I think Dad's about to switch tracks. There's a cutoff up ahead." G said speculatively.

"Won't that take us into 'The Crag'?" Lex asked uncertainly.

"No. Dad's probably going to take us to the Rolling Hills." G cautiously reasoned.

"What's 'The Crag'?" Paul asked curiously.

"It's like this one hill just cracked open and there's a mineshaft that goes down into the middle of it. Dad took me down there once." G said uneasily.

"It's not a place you'd want to go if you're claustrophobic." Lex added.

"Why would you want to go down there?" Paul asked slowly, certain that he was missing something.

"You wouldn't!" G stated emphatically.

"G's probably right. When we get to 'The Crag', there's another switch that'll take us to the Rolling Hills. It's nice there... a perfect place for a Pegasus and a unicorn to frolic." Lex finished with a smile.

"What about a demon and a clown?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"That's a little harder to visualize, but I guess you can frolic there too, if you want to." Lex assured him.

"So, you think we're going to camp out in the Rolling Hills?" G asked cautiously.

"Since Dad brought the sleeper car and the dining car, I think we're going to live in the lap of luxury while enjoying the beauty of nature there. But that's fine. After everything else, I think I'm ready to kick back and relax for a while." Lex said frankly.

"I hope so." G said sincerely.

"You really don't like 'The Crag', do you?" Paul asked with concern.

"What's to like? There's a dark hole that leads deep into the earth. There's nothing to see, nothing to do, it's completely dark, completely silent... It's absolutely horrifying." G finished in a low, disturbed voice.

Paul and Lex exchanged a look but didn't go so far as to confirm that they were thinking the same thing.

"So, do you think that you're ready to test drive the spell for the brace?" Paul asked, more to change the subject than his idle curiosity.

"No. That's going to hold the spell for the matter construct. I'm pretty sure that Lucky's going to have to do that one." Lex said seriously.

"Have you tried doing it?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. But I haven't shown any talent for the alchemical manipulation of elemental matter." Lex said honestly.

"Neither did I... until I tried to do it." Paul said frankly.

"So, what? Is this a redefinition of the 3-D plotter spell from numerology?" Lex slowly asked.

"It started out that way, but it's been redefined and reworked so many times since then that it's hardly the same thing anymore." Paul said as he brought up a whiteboard with the spell written on it.

"Do you really think that I'll be able to cast it?" Lex asked uncertainly.

"I have no idea. But I know that it won't hurt anything to try. This has all the coordinates and definitions filled in for you." Paul said honestly, then thought to add, "And if you can't cast it, then you can try again with Lucky's adaptation of the spell."

"Just hold it right there while I try to do the casting by itself, without the enchantment." Lex said anxiously.

"I'll throw up a quick protection diagram anyway, just in case." Paul said seriously.

As Lex and G watched, a glowing pentagram formed on the table.

"I'm leaving the field in the center open for you. It's completely protected, so you don't have to hold back." Paul said seriously.

"Thanks. I feel a lot better knowing that this isn't going to blow back on us." Lex said honestly.

"I don't think it would have anyway, but it's best to be safe." Paul explained.

"I'm just going to muscle through this. Don't try to stop me if I goof it. I'll probably know that I did it and I'll fix it when I tie the whole thing together at the end." Lex said carefully.

"Go ahead. You've got the Brynnhollow Barrier Crew here. We've got you covered." Paul assured him.

Lex smiled at the assurance.

* * * * *

"I didn't think about it before, but after all the definitions and redefinitions, I don't have a clear image of what it should look like without an illusion." Lex said as he looked at the bizarre fluidly warped cylinder that his spell had created.

"That's not a problem. In Sorcery you have to worry about visualization. This is more of an Alchemy spell than anything else. As long as you get the definitions right, it should do what you want it to." Paul said instructively.

"So, is this what it's supposed to look like?" Lex asked uncertainly.

"Why don't you put it on, changey it, and light up the illusion? It's solid matter now, so you should be able to manipulate it and hang an illusion off of it if you want to." Paul casually suggested.

"I just followed your spell. I don't even know what it's supposed to be." Lex said frankly.

"It's a sleeve." Paul said simply.

"Do you need any help with the illusion part?" G cautiously asked.

"No. I see what I'm doing now. It just didn't make sense there for a minute." Lex said confidently.

"Go ahead." Paul encouraged.

"You ready?" Lex asked his tiny companion, who was once again on his shoulder.

Zephyr bobbed his head once, then focused on the cylinder.

"So I take the matter construct, enact the changey, then overlay the illusion. Is that it?" Lex asked to be sure.

"I could have *sewn* you a jacket in the time this is taking." Paul playfully teased.

"Go ahead." G encouraged with a grin.

With that, Lex put his arm into the cylinder, up to the elbow. As soon as his arm was in place, he enacted the 'changey' to cause the pseudo-matter to magically conform to the shape of his arm within the constraints of what fabric would naturally do.

While the construct didn't look 'glossy', it still had an overwhelming sense of being 'unreal'. Otherwise, the shape ended up being just about what he was intending.

"Nice work. And that's coming from the guy who adapted the matter construct spell into its current form." Paul said seriously.

"Thanks." Lex said timidly, then went ahead with his spellcasting to form the illusion encasing the construct.

Zephyr carefully inspected the illusion and finally gave it a decisive nod of approval.

"So, you can cast the matter construct, the change spell, and the illusion, so logically, the next thing to discover is if you can perform an enchantment." Paul said reasonably.

"Yeah. That's actually the biggest unknown in the whole project. If you can give me a minute to get set up, I was thinking that I could go ahead and try to enchant the brace." Lex said as he picked up the tablecloth with his spell diagram on it.

"If you'd like my advice, I think you should try to enchant something small and unimportant before you do anything to the jewelry that you're planning to use for your project." Paul said seriously.

"And think about Lucky. If this is a team project, then he should be part of your casting of the actual spell." G added.

"Yeah. I know you're right. I just don't want to mess with having to find a new charm." Lex said honestly.

"Paul and I can help you with that." G said confidently.

"We can? What are you thinking?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Remember that thing you did at dinner with the spoon? If you can do that again, it'll give Lex something to enchant." G said as he walked to a built-in cabinet at the side of the room and unlatched a drawer.

"Is that okay with you?" Paul quietly asked, sensing that Lex was a little overwhelmed at the pace that decisions were being made.

"I don't know what type of spell to enchant it with. I wasn't prepared for something like this." Lex said honestly.

"If you think about it, you're going to be severely limited on what you *can* enchant it with. All I'm going to be able to make is a featureless blob made out of a singular component metal, probably silver. That's going to mean moonlight, star fire, or an elemental flow." Paul said frankly.

"You've really learned a lot about this in a short amount of time." Lex said in an impressed tone.

"If I've got all this power I can call up, it's best if I learn what I can do with it." Paul said simply.

"Here you go. Is one enough?" G asked as he placed a spoon on the table before them.

"Since we don't have a clear objective, I guess anything is fine." Paul said honestly.

"Actually, could you hold on for just a minute while I try something? I've got an idea but I don't know if I have the ability to make it work." Lex asked hopefully.

"Just let us know what you need for us to do." Paul said simply.

"This'll either work or it won't. Either way, it'll just take a second." Lex said, then began forming hand signs as he simultaneously spoke the words of his spell aloud.

After a moment, Paul said, "Hey! You learned Corabeth's 'Wall of Force' too!"

"It's an air-based Wizardry, so it would make sense if Lex could use it." G said easily.

When Lex finished enacting his spell, the spoon moved about four inches across the table, then turned itself half-way around before coming to a complete stop.

"Perfect!" Lex said happily.

"Is that what you were trying to do?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I can't do like Corabeth and make the big walls of force, but I wanted to see if I could exercise some fine control with it. The spoon ended up doing exactly what I wanted it to. That means that when you do your 'Devil Fire' thing and make the metal molten, I should be able to 'Wall of Force' it into the shape that I want it to be." Lex excitedly explained.

"'Devil Fire'?" Paul asked with a grin.

"I only saw you do it once and I don't think you ever said exactly what spell you were using." Lex said reasonably.

"'Devil Fire' is close enough. Are you ready?"

"Zephyr? Do you already know what my plan is?" Lex asked seriously.

The tiny horse on his shoulder gave a single, decisive nod.

"He can read your mind?" G asked uncertainly.

"I'm not sure how it all works. I think he can when he bothers to, but he doesn't know everything that I'm thinking. He just peeks in there when he wants to know something." Lex said comfortably, obviously not bothered by Zephyr's ability.

"I guess since he's made from your water, he's kind of part of you, even when he's separate." Paul said speculatively.

"Yeah." Lex said seriously, then stated, "We're ready when you are."

"Right." Paul confirmed, then picked up the spoon as a pentagram appeared on the neighboring tabletop.

Lex hurried to move to the next table and prepared himself for the spell.

"Do you need for me to do the words or gestures for you?" Paul cautiously asked.

"No. I can barely pull together enough fire to light a candle. There's no use in me learning a high-level fire spell like that." Lex said honestly.

"It's a lot more than fire. It's fire manipulating the earth, being constrained by air and water. I use fire in it the most, but all of the primary elements come into play." Paul explained.

"If you need me to do something with air, I can definitely help with that. Otherwise, you can just do it silently." Lex said frankly.

"Naw. I was just offering in case you wanted to see the full version... for inspiration or continuity or something." Paul said as he started performing multiple spells simultaneously.

As G and Lex watched, the spoon began to glow, then to melt.

"Hold it right there for a second!" Lex said suddenly, then began murmuring a spell as he simultaneously performed a succession of hand signs.

At the same time, Zephyr leaped off his shoulder and began to gallop in a long slow arc above the spell diagram.

"What are you doing?" G asked curiously as he watched.

"That's a whole other version of Corabeth's wall of force." Paul said speculatively.

"It looks like he... no, like *they're* using the Wall of Force to shape the metal while it's still fluid." G said speculatively.

"I think Lex is shaping it while Zephyr is forcing the metal to rapidly cool to fix it into place." Paul said carefully as he analyzed what he was seeing.

"What do you think?" Lex asked, somewhat breathlessly, after completing his spellcasting.

Paul and G looked at the strange, angular piece of metal that had been formed and it was finally Paul who said, "It looks kinda like a quartz crystal."

"Good. That's exactly what I was trying for." Lex said as he reached toward the chunk of silver.

"Watch out. It might still be hot." Paul cautioned.

"It's fine. Zephyr already took care of that." Lex said confidently as he picked up the talisman.

"So, does that mean that you're ready to enchant it?" Paul asked curiously.

"Yeah. But let me use the diagram on the tablecloth. I want to be sure that I'm getting the symbols and formulas just the way I want them." Lex said seriously.

"Go ahead. Just remember that we're here if you need us." Paul said as he watched Lex place the silver crystal into the central field of the spell diagram.

While Lex was inspecting the diagram to be sure that everything was in order, Zephyr likewise was walking around the tabletop, examining the symbols and formulae, to verify that each thing accurately represented what they were trying to do.

"G, I should be able to do this myself, but if you notice me faltering, I'd appreciate it if you'd jump in and help me out." Lex said quietly, revealing some of the anxiety he was feeling.

"Me? I've never made a charm before and I don't even know what spell you're trying to enchant it with." G protested.

"Yeah." Lex said with an impish grin at him, then spread his hands expressively over the spell diagram as he began a low chant.

"Hey! That sounds familiar." Paul said uncertainly.

"Yeah. To me too." G agreed.

Zephyr had once again taken flight, galloping in slow motion round the circumference of the table.

"*That's* the spell for the enchantment, the outer casing for the *real* spell." Paul quietly explained at the transition between spells.

"Yeah, but that other, I think it was a spell definition... Something that I've already done. I just can't remember when." G said slowly.

"Same here." Paul quietly agreed.

As Lex moved into the next phase of his spellcasting, he began to incant the spell he was attempting to contain within the silver quartz talisman.

"That's the ice house spell!" Paul said suddenly.

"There's no way you're going to be able to contain a spell that big in a charm. It took me and Paul, each with an ancient relic, to pull it off." G hurried to explain.

Lex fought to contain his smile as he continued his spellcasting.

After a moment of listening, Paul slowly said, "You're contributing the essence of air and I assume that Zephyr is adding the essence of water. The presence of them combined should actually sit well in a fire-forged pure earth element charm."

"But what's the spell? It's not the gazebo that we created." G asked curiously.

"He hasn't said yet... I think he's about to define the effect." Paul said quietly.

There was a long moment as Paul and G concentrated on the spell that Lex was casting.

"What are you, a Batman villain?" G suddenly asked.

Paul burst into laughter at the indignant question.

As soon as Lex was done casting the spell, he said, "The only way a villain could use this to take over the world is if he was determined to do it one square foot at a time. If this thing works at all, the area of effect will be measured in inches."

"So what does it do?" G cautiously asked.

"Flash freeze. If you need to cool something down quickly, you can use this charm instead of having to plod through the long version of the spell." Lex said frankly.

"Wouldn't something like that have a high magical cost?" Paul asked with concern.

"Yeah. It wouldn't be very practical if you were wanting to make a snowboarding run. But if you're just chilling a Coke down for a friend on a warm day, it shouldn't be too costly." Lex said seriously.

"Did this help you at all with what you're working on for school?" G asked curiously.

"First, let's see if it works. The point of this is to prove whether or not I'm capable of enchanting an item." Lex said as he turned the charm over in his hands to examine it carefully.

"From what I can see, everything looks good so far." Paul said seriously.

"What should I freeze?" Lex asked uncertainly as he looked around.

"Hold on. I've got just the thing." G said suddenly, then dashed away before anyone could ask what he had in mind.

Paul glanced at Lex, then cautiously asked, "Have you thought about changing your appearance?"

"How do you mean?" Lex asked cautiously.

"I mean, instead of looking like G, maybe you could look like an aged-up version of Cousin Lex." Paul said speculatively.

"What good would that do?" Lex asked curiously.

"I can just see a situation where you and G being identical might cause a misunderstanding." Paul said honestly.

"For example...?" Lex cautiously asked as G rejoined them.

"If you went on a date with Corabeth, I'm sure she wouldn't want to go with a little kid and if you went as G, someone might think he was cheating on me." Paul said seriously.

"Do you really think that's going to happen?" Lex asked anxiously.

"Well, I haven't had a premonition about it or anything. But it just seems that the longer you run around being G's identical twin, the more committed you are to it." Paul explained reasonably.

"What are we talking about?" G cautiously asked.

"Lex slightly altering his appearance so that he won't be mistaken for you as easily." Paul said simply.

"Actually, it doesn't bother me either way. If someone mistakes us, then we can do the big 'twin reveal' thing. Very dramatic. It'll be like something from a TV sitcom." G finished with a smile.

"You know what? It's none of my business." Paul said frankly, then looked at Lex and explained, "I saw something that might cause you a problem down the road and I warned you about it. Whatever you do or don't decide to do about it is totally up to you."

"I'll think about it." Lex said sincerely, then looked down to G's hand and asked, "Is that for me?"

G held up the can of Coke and said, "Yeah. We've got cold Cokes in the fridge, but I got this one from the cabinet. It's nice and room temperature for you."

"Is this the kind of test you had in mind?" Paul asked to confirm.

"I didn't actually have *anything* in mind. But since this *is* the example that I used, let's go ahead and see what happens." Lex said cheerfully.

G carefully placed the Coke on the table, then backed away, leaving Lex an unobstructed path to his target.

"You ready for this?" Lex asked his Nuggle, who was still on the tabletop.

Zephyr reacted by leaping into the air and galloping in slow motion, eventually coming to rest on Lex's shoulder.

As soon as Zephyr was in place, Lex held the silver quartz charm in both hands and aimed it at the can of Coke.

"Let's do this!" Lex said, then a strange mist seemed to roll forth from the crystal, compounding as it went, spraying more and more slowly on and around the can of Coke before finally engulfing it and coming to a complete stop.

There was a long silent moment as everyone watched to be sure that the spell had reached its conclusion.

"Do either of you happen to have a pick-axe with you?" Lex asked cautiously.

"You *might* want to take a look at regulating the power on that thing." Paul carefully suggested.

"It just did a *major* drain of my magic, all at once. I probably won't be able to use it again for an hour or so." Lex said seriously.

"How much trouble do you think it will be to regulate the power usage on it?" Paul asked seriously.

"I can see why you get all the extra credit assignments." Lex chuckled.

"It's not that I don't care about you, but you're obviously fine and there's a good chance that if we work on this right now, we can fix it, so you'll be able to move on with your project." Paul explained in his own defense.

"Do you know any power regulation spells, right off the top of your head?" Lex asked teasingly.

"A bunch. Take a look at this one." Paul said as he brought up a fresh new 'white board', already filled with writing.

"Okay. Leave that there for me and let me open this thing back up." Lex said as he forced himself to walk to the table with his spell diagram.

"You're walking like a little old man." G observed.

"I bet that if you cast a spell with this thing the way it is now, that you would too." Lex said frankly.

"Should we do something about the Coke can?" G asked as he looked at the frozen structure.

"That thing's frozen so solid that we probably won't be able to chip it off the table for a day or two." Paul said seriously.

"Okay. Zephyr, you ready? We're going to have to cast this together." Lex asked seriously.

Zephyr bobbed his head one time, then bounded off Lex's shoulder and began to gallop in the air above the rim of the spell diagram.

"You and your created construct are performing simultaneous spells in two different primary elemental disciplines. Even though I don't know of any rules saying that it can't work, for some reason it seems like it shouldn't be able to." Paul said slowly.

"There are things that you can do because you're a Cambion. There are things that I can do because I'm an elemental. I say we just accept it and leave it at that." Lex said seriously.

"You've got a deal." Paul was happy to agree.

"Good. Then let's do this. Quick and dirty." Lex said, then began his chant to unseal his previous spell so that he could make amendments to it.

G and Paul watched Lex and Zephyr critically.

In the end, both appreciated the skill Lex used and the aid that Zephyr provided. The spell would have been too demanding and unwieldy if Lex were forced to perform it on his own. He would have at least needed spell components to reinforce the structure and power to his spell, if not the participation of Paul and possibly even G to balance the forces that he was working with.

When Lex finally finished his spellcasting, he had to stop and catch his breath. The spell seemed to run his personal magical reserve exceptionally low.

"Well? Did it work?" Paul asked curiously.

"I think so, but I'm too weak to try it out." Lex reluctantly admitted, then cautiously asked, "G? Would you mind?"

"I guess not. But I don't know how it works." G admitted.

"Point it at something and 'want' for it to be frozen. The charm should take care of the rest." Lex explained.

"I was able to handle the Mikael Spear. I should be able to handle this." G said as he reluctantly accepted the silver quartz charm from Lex.

"Paul? Can you magic me up a target?" G asked with a grin.

"I'd love to." Paul said as a red and white 'bullseye' appeared before them, floating in mid-air.

"I never realized just how literal you take things." G said uncertainly, then pointed the silver quartz charm at the target and firmly said, "Freeze."

Within the span of a heartbeat, the 'bullseye' was encased in a thin coating of ice.

It held in place for nearly a full second before dropping to the floor with a resounding 'thud'.

"Nice!" Paul said in appreciation.

"*That's* what I was trying to do." Lex said expressively.

Zephyr was perched on Lex's shoulder and appeared to be likewise pleased with their accomplishment.

"I guess now we can say, without a doubt, that you *can* enchant a charm." Paul said with a smile.

"Do you mind if I keep the tablecloth?" Lex asked hopefully.

"It's yours, as far as I'm concerned. And if you ever need another one with a fresh diagram, all you have to do is ask. I won't mind at all." Paul said firmly.

"Once I've gotten a few more things worked out, I'll probably end up making a mat for myself, with all my little secrets and tricks woven into it. But I think this should get me by in the meantime."

Chapter 17

As the train began a slow arching turn, G and Lex simultaneously looked outside with identical expressions of concern.

"Is something wrong?" Paul asked cautiously.

"I think we just passed the cutoff for the rolling hills. Dad must be taking us to 'The Crag'." Lex said uncertainly.

"Why would he do that?" Paul asked curiously.

"I have no idea. I only went there one time before and it was horrible." G said anxiously.

"If that's where we're going, it's about to get *very* dark." Lex warned.

"No problem." Paul said as a cloud of Wizard's Lights dispersed through the train car.

"It's not the dark inside that I'm worried about." G said anxiously as he looked out the window at the picturesque scenery speeding by outside.

"Think of it being like when you looked out the door and saw the Meayithan realm instead of Brynnhollow. The thing that your logical mind told you should be there wasn't anymore." Lex tried to explain.

"Yeah. I guess I can see that being a little disturbing." Paul conceded.

As he said the words, the train passed from day into night in an instant.

After a moment to adjust to the dim glow of Wizard's Lights, Paul finally said, "Even when you know it's coming, it's kind of a shock."

Without a word, G walked to the nearest wall sconce oil lamp and briefly performed the spell to light it.

"Your horse is glowing." Paul said uncertainly, taking note of the gentle rainbow hue of light emanating from Zephyr.

"Yeah." Lex confirmed, then slowly added, "I guess he can do that."

Paul hesitantly nodded.

Zephyr bucked a little and turned himself around on Lex's shoulder before coming to rest.

The rainbow aura that Zephyr had been projecting now enveloped Lex and radiated out from him as well.

"Um, okay." Paul said uncertainly.

"That's better." G said as he stepped away from the final oil lamp.

Paul glanced at the absolute blackness outside the window and fought not to mention that the light of the lamps only made the darkness outside seem that much darker.

* * * * *

"How long does this go on?" Paul thought to ask as the train showed no signs of slowing.

"I have no idea. The last time I was here, I was a little too freaked out to keep track of time." G admitted.

"Even though I can hear and feel the tracks beneath us, somehow it still feels like we're flying." Paul observed.

"Not helping." G said past gritted teeth.

Paul recognized G's distress and moved to his side to envelope him in a firm hug.

"Are you okay, Lex?" G asked from the safety and security of Paul's arms.

"Yeah. I think I am." Lex said uncertainly.

* * * * *

"This is weird." Paul said quietly.

"What's that?" G asked curiously.

"I'm getting a feeling, it's like the Vinculum, but it's not." Paul said slowly as he struggled to put his feelings into words.

"So it's not a point of multi-location?" Lex asked cautiously.

"No. Not that. Something else." Paul said quietly.

"Is it a pocket of folded space, like the Nevermore protectorate?" Lex guessed.

"Not folded. No. But... we *could* be approaching another realm." Paul said speculatively.

"That's just crazy. We can't have a doorway to a foreign realm right in our own backyard." G protested.

"Think about who they called when there was a problem that dealt with protecting secret realms. What made Dad so qualified to deal with it?" Paul asked reasonably.

"Just like Steven was the caretaker of the Waxell Vinculum gate, Dad may be the caretaker of this... whatever it is." Lex said speculatively.

"If that was true, why wouldn't he tell us?" G asked reluctantly.

"Maybe he *tried* to tell you, but when you reacted so negatively to crossing the void, he changed his mind." Paul carefully suggested.

"Or he decided to give you some time to grow and learn before trying again." Lex quietly offered.

"Yeah. The last time I was here I freaked out so bad, the next thing I remember was us coming out of the dark and going to the rolling hills." G said distantly.

"It sounds like it could be some kind of security spell on the passage that won't allow you to enter if you don't meet some kind of standards." Paul cautiously suggested.

"But now, since we've been through everything at Brynnhollow, we should all be able to handle whatever this realm has to throw at us." Lex reasoned.

"Except Lucky, maybe." G said frankly.

"He's a Child of the Sun, he should be okay." Lex said confidently.

"Maybe it's because I was raised mundane, but I don't have any idea what that means." Paul said honestly.

"I was raised as a witch and I don't know what it means either." G said simply.

"I'm still figuring it out for myself, but as far as I can tell, it has something to do with his mimicry. In fact, it might even be the cause of it."

"Yeah. But what is it?"

"He copies magic, which is a common enough specialty for a witch to have. In fact, when you look at his mom's ability, his mimicry thing almost makes sense." Lex said honestly.

"You two got evaluated this morning, didn't you? What did Dr. Williams have to say about it?" G asked curiously.

"Basically, he confirmed that it's a thing. It happens. He didn't really tell us much more than that."

"Somehow I expected him to be more helpful." G said honestly.

"It's probably one of those things where it could go a few different ways, so they don't tell us too much so we don't feel pressured or something." Paul said speculatively.

"Yeah. We make much better decisions when we're stumbling around in the dark." Lex said sarcastically.

G looked out the windows at the statement and Lex immediately regretted his choice of words.

"Like I was saying, Lucky can also cast new spells that he made up all by himself, like his spell for Zah Zah. I don't think there's any way, no matter how hard they tried, that some other kid would be able to bring one of his drawings to life like that." Lex said reasonably.

"It's called animation. Have you met Dad? That's kind of his thing." Paul said with a grin.

"Okay. But even then, the animation does what you tell it to. It doesn't think for itself. There's something more going on here and I have a feeling that understanding it is the only way that we're really going to be able to help Lucky with his problems." Lex said frankly.

"You say that, but then you've got Zephyr, who you created and who seems to be able to think for himself." G said in a leading tone.

"I'm not sure how that happened. I summoned a cloud of mist and got a Nuggle, but it ended up working out great. He's smart and he helps me when I need it and he's not afraid to tell me when I'm doing something wrong. I can't think of anything more that I'd want in a magical companion." Lex said honestly.

"Do you mean 'familiar'?" G asked cautiously.

"Yes and no." Lex responded, then explained, "Even though Zephyr and I work well together, we don't have a contract. Until we do, I'll call him my magical companion."

"Mah Zah and Ginh Zah can probably help with the contract if you wanted them to, since they've been through it." Paul said seriously.

"We might end up doing that, but not yet. It's too soon." Lex said decisively.

Zephyr bobbed his head in agreement.

G once again looked nervously outside the train at the infinite blackness.

* * * * *

"Yeah. There it is. We're entering another realm." Paul said abruptly into the silence, causing both Lex and G to startle.

"What can you tell us about it?" G asked anxiously.

"We just crossed a magical boundary. We're not in the Earth realm anymore... I really don't have a point of reference to tell you where we are except to say... somewhere else." Paul said reluctantly.

"Can you tell if it's heaven or hell?" Lex asked cautiously.

"It's neither, as far as I can tell. But it doesn't feel like pure nature to me, either." Paul said uncertainly.

"You don't think it's an elemental plane, do you?" G asked anxiously.

"Not really. Nothing's screaming out at me about it." Paul said honestly.

"Well, I'm sensitive to the air element and I can tell you for sure that it isn't that." Lex said confidently.

G nodded his agreement to Lex's assessment.

"What about you, Zephyr? Do you feel the water in here?" Paul thought to ask.

After a moment to consider, Zephyr tilted his head sideways, indicating his indecision.

"Yeah, me neither." Paul confirmed.

"What do you think it is?" G asked as he looked out the window longingly, desperate for any clue.

"Zephyr and I can sense water, but not *just* water. It's not a pure water realm, that much is for sure, but it *could* be a quasi-elemental realm, like mist or steam." Paul slowly explained.

"Or ooze." Lex said unenthusiastically, letting his displeasure with the possibility be clearly heard in his voice.

"I doubt that Dad would take us anywhere too extreme. We're not exactly equipped for extra-planar travel." G said anxiously.

"When you consider the magic level that we're at and our recent experiences, we're actually fairly well prepared for something like this." Paul said frankly.

"And if we needed to, there are some charms that I know of that we can enchant to help us adapt ourselves even more." Lex added.

"I know where you got that idea from, and I can't believe that you'd want to use spells the same way that she did." G said bitterly.

"I'm not interested in following in your mom's footsteps but it won't help any of us if I refuse to use my abilities because they *might* bring up a painful memory for you." Lex said seriously.

"Guys? Do we have a problem?" Paul cautiously interrupted.

After a moment to consider, G reluctantly said, "No. He's right. I just remember the charms that Mom wore all the time. A lot of them were like what he's talking about using, they had to do with adapting to different realms."

"Why?" Paul asked curiously.

G puzzled over the one-word question for a moment, then cautiously asked, "Why what?"

"Why would she carry charms for travel to different realms?" Paul asked insistently.

"I... I don't know." G finally admitted.

"Now that you mention it, that *does* seem strange." Lex agreed.

"What was your mom's big magic?" Paul asked curiously.

"She could do high-level charms, way beyond the stuff we're learning about in Basic." G said seriously.

"But she always had charms on her that had to do with different realms?" Paul asked to confirm.

"Yeah." G said slowly, then added, "I guess it *doesn't* make much sense, when you stop and think about it."

"Maybe she just wanted to be prepared for whatever was going to happen, like people who always carry an umbrella or a flashlight, just in case they might ever need it someday." Lex said speculatively.

"Or maybe she received some kind of warning in an augury or something that let her know that someday she'd be shipped off to another realm... possibly not of her own free will." Paul quietly added.

"Do you think she could have had some kind of a ward or something on her to let her survive in a hell dimension?" G asked suddenly.

"Yeah. I do." Paul said simply.

G looked at him curiously, surprised by the immediate response.

"I heard a rumor that she's still alive. Mah Zah and Ginh Zah could probably dig into it and try to find her if you wanted to make contact." Paul said hesitantly.

"How long have you known?" G asked cautiously.

"Just for a day or so." Paul answered quietly.

"Why didn't you tell me?" G asked in a low pained voice.

"I found out while we were all up to our eyeballs in magic, performing the biggest spell that any of us is likely to ever see... I guess it slipped my mind." Paul finished with a shrug.

"So you think that she wore all those adaptation charms because she knew that she was going to be banished to another realm?" Lex asked cautiously.

"It's possible. I mean, *that* makes more sense than her just having some kind of weird hoarding compulsion for that one particular type of charm that she just happened to end up needing one day, all of a sudden." Paul said reasonably.

"Maybe, but the hoarding thing is possible too. I mean, along with all her other charms, she even had an Earth realm adaptation charm that she wore all the time." Lex said uncomfortably.

"I remember that one. It looked like a little multi-colored leaf made of tin." G said distantly.

"If that was an earth adaptation charm, that could mean that she's not native to the Earth realm." Paul cautiously suggested.

"She's my mom. If she wasn't a witch, then I'd be half a non-witch too." G said dismissively.

"Except that the Earth realm isn't the only place where witches live. I can think of at least five other realms that she could be from, right off the top of my head." Paul said frankly.

"This realm that we're crossing into... What if it's hers? What if this is the realm where she came from?" Lex quietly asked.

Before anyone could answer, the train started to slow as a burnt orange dusky light began to reveal the world around them.

* * * * *

The scenery was bleak.

The vast wooded area surrounding them looked as though it had lost the will to live or perhaps the hazy stagnant air had slowly choked the life out of it.

What few leaves remained on the trees threatened to fall at the slightest hint of a breeze, which seemed unlikely to ever come.

As the train continued to slow, the boys saw that they were coming to a stop in front of what looked like a building, a desolate, abandoned train platform.

"I don't think anything lives here." G said quietly as he looked out the window.

"The industrial area is usually down by the tracks. All the people are probably nearer to the city center." Paul said half-jokingly.

"I have a funny feeling that this may *be* the city center."

As the train finally came to a complete stop, there was a sudden hiss as the pressure of the engine released.

G walked across the train car to look out the opposite window at the vast ocean of barren trees surrounding them in the strange dark amber twilight.

"If there's nothing here, why are we stopping?" Lex asked as he stepped to G's side to join him in his distant gaze.

"For dinner, maybe?" G guessed.

"I don't know if I feel like eating now." Lex said anxiously.

"Not feel like eating? Is that really a thing?" Paul asked with a grin.

G smiled at the words, then said, "It must be something elementals can do."

Lex finally started to smile, then turned suddenly when the door to the outside opened.

"Dad? What's going on?" G rushed to ask.

"I thought you three would be ready for dinner. I know that Lucky's hungry." D said frankly.

"No, I mean, where are we? What are we doing here?" G asked urgently.

"You must really be upset if you want answers more than you want food." D said seriously.

G stopped and considered for a moment, then admitted, "I want both. But if we stop to have dinner, will you tell us what's going on?"

"It'd be kind of pointless for me to bring you all the way out here, then refuse to tell you why we're here." D said honestly.

"Okay. Then I guess we're ready to eat." G said as he looked at Lex and Paul to verify that they were in agreement.

"What happened to this Coke?" Lucky asked curiously as he tugged on the mound of ice to test its strength.

"Lex was enchanting an ice charm, just to see if he could do it." Paul answered simply.

"I take it that your test was a success." D said speculatively.

"After a little fine tuning, yeah. I think it was." Lex weakly proclaimed.

"That thing nearly drained all his magic in one go." Paul added frankly.

"Be careful of that. Charm magic can be unforgiving in that respect. There's something to be said for spellcasting where you can stop or change tactics midstream when you notice something going wrong. With most charms, you're committed to the enchantment until the spell has run its course." D said sagely.

"Like a curse." Paul said simply.

"They're cut from the same cloth." D confirmed, then started walking toward the door to the dining car.

"Yeah. It was scary for a minute, like when the spell was done, there'd be nothing left of me." Lex said as he followed.

"Given how you came to be with us, that's not impossible." D said frankly.

"I already took care of that." Paul said seriously, then explained, "Zephyr and I have made it so that Lex is more than a pure element. He's an actual instance, a being. What would disperse or dispel a pure elemental won't hurt him any more than it would the rest of us."

"Good work, Zeph." Lex said tenderly to his little friend.

"Hey! What about me?" Paul asked with playful indignation.

"Thanks for anchoring me to this world. I probably wouldn't have noticed that there was a problem until it was too late for me to do anything about it." Lex said sincerely.

"Well, this is one of those things that come with my demon heritage. I don't know *how* I knew about the danger or what to do to fix it. But just like before, I trusted that the instinct that was guiding me, was telling me the right thing to do." Paul said seriously, as D led the group to a large dining table.

The table was already set with silver, linens and even filled glasses of water. All that was missing was the food.

"Be careful of that, Paul. It's possible for your... connection to that part of yourself to be interrupted. You need to be sure that you're able to reason things out for yourself and be confident in your own decisions, independent of what your demonic instincts tell you." D said sagely.

"So you're saying that my demon heritage might fail me someday?" Paul asked curiously as he watched D go into the kitchen area of the dining car.

D emerged a moment later with steaming hot plates of food as he said, "If your demon heritage gives you an advantage in certain situations, then it wouldn't surprise me if someone found a way to circumvent that advantage."

As soon as the plates were placed before Lucky and Lex, D withdrew into the kitchen to gather another load.

"I know he's right. I just don't want to think about people plotting against me all the time." Paul said honestly.

"Not thinking about it won't help you to prepare." D said as he stepped out of the kitchen with two more steaming plates.

"But always worrying about someone trying to take me down sounds like a miserable way to live." Paul said honestly, as D placed a plate of food before him.

"Obsessing about it *is* a miserable way to live. But taking reasonable precautions can actually help one to sleep better at night." D said before ducking back into the kitchen.

"What is this?" Lucky cautiously asked as he examined the food that had been placed before him.

"Stroganoff, mixed vegetables, and a buttered dinner roll." D said simply as he walked to the table, carrying his own plate.

"I don't think I've ever had this before." Lucky said as he poked at the stroganoff with his fork.

"Take a taste and see if you like it." Lex said encouragingly.

Lucky looked around to see that everyone else had already started, then gathered a small bite onto his fork before tentatively taking a bite.

"So, what do you think? Do you like it?" Lex asked hopefully.

"I think so. Is this mushrooms?" Lucky asked as he hesitantly pointed with his fork.

"Yeah. At least, I'm pretty sure that there's some mushrooms in it." Lex said cautiously.

"My mom doesn't like mushrooms, so she'd never feed us something like this." Lucky said before taking another bite.

"You've never eaten mushrooms before?" Paul asked curiously.

"No. I've never eaten *this* before, because it's something that has mushrooms in it." Lucky explained between bites.

"Hopefully you'll find lots of new things to try this weekend." D said with a smile.

"So, where are we and what are we doing here?" G asked firmly.

"I assume that you've already deduced that we've left the Earth realm." D said cautiously.

"Yeah. That train ride through the twilight zone tipped us off." G said impatiently.

"You didn't figure it out last time we came here." D said in his defense.

"Where are we?" G asked firmly.

"You see how he treats me? I try to provide a weekend getaway adventure and he's short-tempered and demanding with me." D said in a wounded tone.

"Dad!" G said in exasperation.

"Alright. Enough games. The realm that we've entered is called 'Frakish Vallum'." D said seriously.

"Chaos Trench?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I'm sure it's something like that. I'm not aware of there being an *exact* translation of it." D said carefully.

"Why did you bring us here?" G asked insistently.

"Do you think that I was too permissive with him? Should I have worked a little harder to teach him proper manners before trying to take him out into the world?" D asked distantly, in an agonized tone.

"Dad! You took us to a whole other realm! Isn't that enough of a reason to freak out a little?" G demanded to know.

"I think he knows his manners just fine, but maybe you could have taken him out and exposed him to different places a little bit more so he wouldn't have such a freak out about switching realms." Paul said speculatively.

"We'll have to make a point of doing that with Kay." D said decisively.

G closed his eyes, then took in a long slow deliberate breath before carefully saying, "If you wouldn't mind telling, maybe you could explain why you've brought us here."

"I thought that after the week you've had, that it might be nice to do something a little out of the ordinary for rest and relaxation." D said pleasantly.

"Why do I get the feeling that you're not telling us the whole truth?" G slowly asked.

"Because you're distrusting and defiant, I suppose." D said simply.

G's eyes went wide at the surprising words.

"Which is just the way you want him to be." Paul added confidently.

"Yes. I suppose so. Although there are times when someone more gullible and compliant would be easier to deal with." D said with a grin in G's direction.

"Just say the word and we can make a bunch of mindless mannequins for you. And with your magic, you can even make them do whatever you want." Paul said before returning his attention to his plate of food.

"Be sure to eat your fill because you won't be able to eat or drink anything while we're there." D warned the boys.

"Where?" G asked cautiously.

"I asked Beth to see that all of you had something warm to wear, so you should have coats and the like in the sleeper car waiting for you. You'll need them." D said seriously.

"Do one of you guys want to try asking him? I don't seem to be getting through." G asked plaintively.

"Where are we going, Dad?" Paul cautiously asked.

"Oh? Didn't I tell you?" D asked with a grin at him.

"No. Not yet." Paul hesitantly responded.

As Paul was answering, D got up from the table and walked out of the dining car.

"Does he mess with you like this very often?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Not really, but I don't think it's something to worry about. I think Dad just wants to get things a certain way before he puts his plan into action." G said speculatively.

"So he's getting everything put into place?" Paul asked cautiously.

Before G could answer, D walked back into the room with a large canvas bag.

"You're going to be needing a little spending money in case you want to go off on your own at some point." D said as he started taking pouches out of the canvas bag and handing them around the table.

"Where are we going?" Paul asked firmly without sounding too demanding.

"It's kind of a carnival... in a way." D said reluctantly, obviously not happy with his description.

"So the place we're going is having a carnival this weekend?" Paul asked to confirm.

"Something like that, yeah." D said evasively, then quickly added, "Be sure that you don't eat or drink anything while we're there."

"You said that before, does that mean that the food from this realm will make us sick?" Lex asked anxiously.

"Certain realms have different rules. The food here might not make you sick, but it can change you." D said reluctantly.

"We'll become part of this world. We won't be able to leave." Paul said speculatively.

"If events unfold a certain way, yes. That *could* happen." D confirmed.

"Then why are we here at all? If it's so dangerous, why not just stay home?" G asked seriously.

"And what will you do fifty years from now? Will you look back on all the nights that you were safely tucked away in your bed at home, or will you look back on the slightly dangerous adventure that you were able to have in your youth with your father and your brothers.?" D asked, his playful tone conspicuously absent.

"There's still more to it than what you're saying." G said suspiciously.

"There's more to it than I can possibly tell you, and much more than you really want to know." D said honestly.

"Is this where Mom's from?" G finally dared to ask.

"In a way." D answered.

"That was a 'yes' or 'no' question." G told his father firmly.

"Don't eat or drink *anything* while you're here." D said quietly.

Looks flashed amongst the boys as all but Lucky concocted likely scenarios from D's answer.

"There *is* one other notable thing about the place we'll be going to." D said in prelude as he looked around at the boys to gauge their preparedness.

Paul was, as usual, somewhat subdued, yet confident. D had noticed that being true of his nature.

G, on the other hand, was cocky, sometimes to a fault, allowing his bravado to hide his occasional insecurity. While his braggadocio would sometimes write checks that

he was unable to cash, it likewise served to force him out of the cocoon of safety and security that he typically enjoyed.

In contrast, Lex seemed to know his capabilities and limitations very well. If he professed to be able to do something, then he honestly believed that he could do it. He wasn't averse to taking risks, but appeared to be reasonably secure in his abilities before he tested them.

Lucky was... fearless, at least when it came to trying new spells and testing his limits. He was willing to trust and believe to a point that none of the other boys would. And while that held its dangers, it also had the potential to open doors for him, many of which were inaccessible to the timid.

"G, just so there's no misunderstanding later, your clown transformation will be looked upon favorably here. You can feel free to wear it openly as much as you like." D said seriously.

"You've never told me that I can 'clown out' in public before." G said hesitantly.

"The last time we were here, you didn't seem to be in the mood." D said frankly.

G could only nod his acceptance of the statement as his mind raced.

"Paul, you can feel free to display your demon form if you like, and of course you can bring your familiars... except it would probably be best if they wore their native forms. I don't think earthly forms would be appropriate here. They might be looked upon as food." D said honestly.

"What about Zephyr?" Lex asked anxiously.

"You can take him with you if you want but be sure to keep him close. If he looks too cute and cuddly, he might trigger someone's appetite."

"How about Zah Zah?" Lucky asked hesitantly.

"Oh, I'm sure Zah Zah will be just fine in her natural form. She'll be the belle of the ball." D said with a smile.

"So, if we can let the helpers and familiars out, does that mean it's okay to do magic here?" Paul asked speculatively.

"In most situations, yes." D reluctantly answered.

"Are regular humans not allowed here?" Lex guessed.

"I'm sure that they'd be welcomed warmly enough..." D trailed off with a pained look.

"Welcomed with lots of food and drink?" Paul asked speculatively.

"Exactly." D confirmed.

"So, is this realm some kind of a trap?" G asked curiously.

"No, no... not really." D assured him, then reluctantly continued, "Well, yes. In a way. At least it *can* be."

"You eat or drink something here and you become one of them, don't you?" Paul cautiously asked.

"It begins the conversion process. Not everyone survives it, and not everyone who completes it ends up being human, or even humanoid." D said slowly as he watched for their reactions.

"Which, I guess, would be another good reason not to eat their food. You never know *who* you'd be eating." Paul said frankly.

"They tend not to have a lot of luck with agriculture here." D reluctantly confirmed.

"Why are we here again?" G cautiously asked.

"Not only did I want to share this part of your heritage with you, but I'd also like to show you off to your mom's family... at least, the only family that she ever knew." D said hesitantly.

"So Mom got trapped here and you got her out and married her?" G asked speculatively.

"It's funny to hear it summed up so succinctly. The whole process of finding a way to get her out of here took years of research and struggle." D said distantly.

"So *you* weren't trapped here?" Paul asked to verify.

"No. I was introduced to Frakish Vallum by my father and helped him to maintain and regulate the gate." D said quietly.

"Is that why we have the train?" G asked curiously.

"The train can be used to access the gate, but if we didn't have it, there are other ways." D explained, then thought to add, "And there are times when this realm intersects with ours, all on its own."

"So, what are we doing now?" Paul asked curiously.

"If you're finished eating, get your coats on so that we can go." D said simply.

"If it's so dangerous, why are we doing this?" Paul asked seriously.

"To expand your world, I suppose. Plus, one of these days I'll want to retire, and I'd like it if one of my children would take my place as the protector of Frakish Vallum."

Chapter 18

"The air is hard to breathe here." Lucky said as they walked away from the train platform.

"I haven't noticed anything wrong with it." Lex said honestly.

Lucky moved to Lex's side, then cautiously said, "It's better over here by you."

"I don't know. Maybe you just passed through a cloud of foul air." Lex said uncertainly.

"If he did, the rest of us are still in it." Paul said frankly.

"Yeah. It's pretty rank." G added.

"What spell are you using, Lex? Can you teach it to me?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"I'm not using any spell, as far as I know." Lex said honestly.

"Purifying air might be part of his elemental thing, like Dex being able to dismiss tarnish. It's on until he turns it off." Paul said speculatively as they walked.

"Yeah. I guess it could be." Lex said uncertainly.

"Lucky, I can probably come up with an air cleaning spell for you, if you want." G said from ahead of them.

"Before you get too far into that, it looks like it's about to get dark. Should we bring some flashlights or lanterns or something with us, or is it going to be okay for us to light our way entirely with magic?" Paul asked cautiously.

"It never gets fully dark here... or fully light. This realm is in perpetual twilight." D carefully explained.

"How can anything live here like that?" G asked anxiously.

"Beings from outside are adapted to function here. Some become predators, many become prey. Regardless, when a vacancy comes open, the realm seeks to fill it." D said frankly.

"What are the chances that it's going to try to fill a vacancy with one of *us*?" Paul asked warily.

"I won't lie to you. It's possible that one of the residents, or perhaps even the realm itself, will take an interest in you. But if you'll follow the rules of the realm, you should be alright." D said seriously.

"Do you think it's going to be safe for Lucky?" Lex asked anxiously.

"I think that between us, we *should* be able to keep an eye on him." D said confidently.

"But we'll be free to go off on our own and explore the... carnival?" G asked uncertainly.

"Yes. For the most part. But I need to warn you that some of the 'temptations' available at the different booths are of an adult nature. I'm not bringing you here to experience those 'forbidden fruits'."

"What *are* you bringing us here to experience?" G asked cautiously.

"Horrors and delights, I suppose. I'm not so much bringing you here to indulge in those things as much as I am exposing you to the idea of them in the context of a foreign culture. I believe that this may help you to gain a perspective that you might not be able to adopt otherwise." D said carefully.

"What are you talking about? Sex? Drugs?" Paul asked curiously.

"I'm sure there will be some of that around, but those things are used to entrap the weakest of weak-minded individuals. I'm confident that you'll be able to avoid those snares. What I'm really talking about is ancient forbidden knowledge and bizarre magical practices that have been abandoned by polite society in recent centuries." D said quietly.

"That actually sounds kinda cool." Paul reluctantly admitted.

"If nothing else, it may expose you to new ways to express your magic. That alone would make the whole trip worth it." D finished with a smile.

"Is that it?" G asked as he pointed ahead of them.

"Yes. Although it looks like they've changed the name since the last time I was here. It appears that it's now known as the 'Sanguine Night' Carnival." D said as he struggled to read the banner at a distance.

"Why'd they change it?" Lucky asked curiously from D's side.

"Traditionally, the name changes when the leadership of the carnival changes. I suppose we'll find out about that in a few minutes." D said pleasantly.

"Lucky? Did you just do some kind of an air spell? The air feels different all of a sudden?" Lex asked curiously.

"Yeah. I just did what you're doing and made the air turn good before it gets to me." Lucky easily explained.

"Well, I'm glad you're able to do that." Lex said honestly.

"You'll have to show me that spell. That's really nice." G said appreciatively.

"I can do it for you right now, you and Paul both." Lucky said happily, and before anyone could question it, he started his spellcasting.

"Paul. If you're going to summon your demons, you might want to do that now to give them a few minutes to acclimate." D helpfully suggested.

"It'll take me a second to compensate for being in a different realm." Paul said slowly as he seemed to be concentrating on something distant.

"Is that going to be a problem?" G asked with concern.

"No. Not after meeting the avatars of the zodiac. Now I have a much better idea of where everything is." Paul said confidently.

"Lucky, you can summon Zah Zah whenever you're ready. Lex... you might want to see if there's anything you can do to make Zephyr look a little bit less adorable. I'm afraid the first person we meet might not be able to resist the temptation and just eat him right then and there." D said frankly.

"How about a basset hound?" Lex asked as Zephyr turned into a blob of loose fur.

"You might want to try again. That is one seriously cuddly puppy." D said regretfully.

"Zephyr, can you go back to that scary form? The green one you used to express evil intent?" Lex asked his Nuggle curiously.

The tiny Basset Hound began to reform itself, returning to a generally horse-like shape, but not to the gentle little Nuggle that he had been before. Now Zephyr had severe dark green features and appeared to be draped with seaweed. His eyes glowed a faint, threatening red.

After a moment to get over the surprise, D cautiously said, "That looks a little *too* good. Is this another illusion or is he really a Kelpie?"

"What answer would make you feel better?" Lex reluctantly asked.

"Given the situation we're about to walk into, I'd say that him being an actual Kelpie would be in both your best interests." D said frankly.

"Don't ask me to explain, because I don't know, but I just have a feeling that the Nuggle and the Kelpie are both expressions of who and what Zephyr actually is." Lex said uncertainly.

Paul smiled at the statement, then made a slight swirly motion toward the ground.

When Mah Zah and Ginh Zah appeared, Paul told them, "You can see where Dad brought us. Don't ask me to explain the why, I'm still a little foggy on that part. Anyway, you can go ahead and change into your demon forms if you like or you can pick a form that's better suited to this realm. Dad said that puppies and kittens would be looked at as food here."

Ginh Zah, still in her kitten form, did a visual survey of their surroundings and sniffed the air before transforming into her demonic form, along with the bat wings to aid her mobility.

In a swift move, she took flight and made one quick circle over the group before landing on Paul's left shoulder, in her rightful place.

Meanwhile, Mah Zah, in her puppy form, scampered over to G then began yipping as she ran around his feet.

"Sure. If you like. I'm sure that whatever you choose will be fine." G said with a chuckle under his words.

A moment later, G was ready to eat those words when the solid black, heavily furred, nearly foot tall spider appeared at his feet. The spider appeared to have a faint patch of gray, almost-white fur around her left multifaceted eye.

"Yeah. No one's going to mistake *you* for food." G said reluctantly.

Faster than G would have thought possible, Mah Zah scaled his body and came to rest on his right shoulder.

G could barely hide his revulsion at the sensation of eight little stick legs keeping Mah Zah steady in place.

"Lucky? Would you like for Zah Zah to join us?" D asked encouragingly.

"I'm afraid that she'll do something to hurt someone or make someone mad." Lucky said honestly.

"She might." D admitted, then explained, "But I can't think of a better place for her to learn how to be around people. Everyone here will be able to relate to the experience of fighting to control a monster of their own making. I'm sure that if you'll do your best with her, it'll be enough."

"Zah Zah! It's okay! You can come out and play!" Lucky said excitedly as he opened the front of his coat.

The scribbled nightmare with the too-human eyes leaped out of the coat and landed on the ground in front of Lucky.

"Uncle D said that you'll probably like it here. It's a place where you can be yourself." Lucky said seriously.

Zah Zah responded with a raspy screeching meow, which could be taken to mean that she accepted Lucky's statement.

"Uncle D, would you like for me to do my air spell on you too? It works and you don't have to do anything to keep it going after I've cast it." Lucky asked hopefully.

"Thank you for the thought, Lucky. But there's no need. All I'll need to do is summon my companion to acclimate me." D said quietly.

"You have a companion too?" G asked with surprise.

"Of sorts." D said evasively, then explained, "I don't have the same attachment to Mr. Sticks that you have to your companions. He's more of an ally than a friend."

"If you're going to do it, you'd better do it. We're almost there." G said seriously.

"*Simple emblem, valiant heart. Stick bones, vine sinew, rough-hewn skin. From the essence of this world, I summon you to come forth. Stand with me, Mr. Sticks.*" D said very clearly and deliberately.

"Nice one. Elegant." Paul said appreciatively.

In the dim twilight, they could register movement all around them, but couldn't identify what was moving.

A moment later, several sticks seemed to gather themselves together.

"How's this different from one of your regular animations?" G asked curiously as he continued to watch the little stick man form.

"My usual animations are of things which already exist in their final form before I enchant them. Mr. Sticks is made anew every time I summon him from whatever suitable debris happens to be lying about."

"Him being made from this world but also sharing your magical bond would make *you* native to this realm to some degree. That would make it so that the air here wouldn't bother you." Paul said uncertainly.

"Exactly right. That's another very good reason that I summon Mr. Sticks when I'm travelling outside the Earth realm." D confirmed, then offered his hand to the little stick man who was lying on the ground.

Mr. Sticks took his hand and used it to pull himself to standing.

"Why doesn't he have a face?" Lucky asked in a disturbed tone.

"The more detailed I make his appearance, the more time and magic it takes to form him each time I summon him." D easily explained.

"Is there anything else we need to know about this place that we're going to?" Paul asked anxiously.

"According to the rules of this world, no one here can hurt you if you don't give your consent. They can tempt you or torment you, but they don't have any claim to keep you here or do anything to you unless you give your permission or enter into some type of a relationship with them and incur an obligation."

"What do you mean by 'obligation'?" Paul asked cautiously.

"If they give you something and you accept it, that can be taken as a *quid pro quo*. You have accepted a thing of value and are indebted to repay it with another thing of similar value." D said carefully.

"So basically, don't take gifts from strangers." Paul said firmly.

"Yes. But also be aware that not all gifts are tangible. A gift of affection or a service of some sort can obligate you just as easily." D said frankly.

"But you gave us these bags of money so we don't have to worry about that, right?" G asked cautiously.

"Sort of. You can use the money in those pouches to purchase goods and services. Once both parties are satisfied with the transaction, the obligation is ended."

"Is this a test or a trap?" Paul cautiously asked.

"Yes." D answered simply.

"Then why are we doing it?" Paul asked reasonably.

"I want for you to be able to judge worth and know how to barter so that you can engage in equitable trade when you're on your own. I want you to learn those lessons here because you'll see so many flagrant examples of lures and scams that are more subtle and insidious in our realm." D said frankly.

"But we could have learned that anywhere. There's another reason for us to be here, not just this realm, but at this carnival in particular." Paul said speculatively.

"Partly, for the spectacle of it. The rides are dangerous fun, the attractions are fascinating entertainment, and the trinkets can provide you with hours and days of delight." D said with a smile.

"So, it's like a regular carnival, but taken to the next level for witches?" Paul guessed.

"It's not just for witches. You might find any number of creatures here, both natural and otherwise. The only time you'll ever see very many witches here is when this realm naturally intersects with one where witches live. Those who know about the carnival will sometimes go on a pilgrimage so that they can attend." D said with a distant smile.

"Does that mean that someone who follows astrology might be able to keep track of where and when this realm would open into ours?" G asked uncertainly.

"Yes. Exactly. Even a few of the mundane people have managed to figure it out, although it's infrequent enough that it's almost unheard of for a mundane person to encounter it twice in one lifetime." D said frankly.

Zah Zah looked up at D and impatiently hissed at him.

"Alright. Alright. I'll stop yapping so that you can get to your fun." D said with a good-natured chuckle.

* * * * *

"Welcome to the Sanguine Night Carnival!" A comical portly clown said as he flawlessly juggled five juggling clubs.

"Thank you." D said firmly, then asked a little more quietly, "I was wondering what happened to Mr. Never. Last I heard, he was the one in charge of this carnival."

"It is believed that he finally found what he was looking for and set off on a new adventure. Whether it be his redemption or damnation, who can say? I honestly couldn't tell you the difference, assuming that there is one. Regardless, he has moved on. Sanguine Night is the new carnival manager and master of ceremonies."

"I'll look forward to meeting... her?" D guessed.

The clown nodded, then asked, "Did you have some business with her? I could introduce you."

"Actually, yes. I'm primarily here to let my sons enjoy the festivities of your wonderful carnival, but I'm also the guardian of the second gate. If it's not an inconvenience, I would like to have a short meeting with Ms. Night in that capacity, whenever she has a free moment to speak with me." D said carefully.

"Are you the one known to us as 'D'?" The clown asked cautiously.

"I am. And who might you be?" D asked curiously.

"The Prince, Maltese." The clown said as he threw his clubs forcefully into the air, before gracefully bowing to D with respect.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Prince. These are my sons, G, Paul, Lex, and Lucky." D said formally.

The prince flawlessly caught the clubs and went back to his juggling as he said, "It's a pleasure to meet you all. Please come in and experience what we have on offer. I know that everyone will be overjoyed to see you."

"We will. Thank you." Paul said on behalf of the group.

Without prompting, G brought his clown face fully forward and waited for the clown's acknowledgement before letting it go.

The Prince Maltese gave a subtle, almost imperceptible nod before going about his business.

* * * * *

As soon as the group stepped across the threshold of the carnival all the boys except Lucky suddenly stopped in their tracks.

"There's something seriously wrong here." Paul said as he looked around warily.

"I was curious to know if you'd be able to detect that." D said with a smile.

"It's like a sorcery, but it's not entirely illusion." G said slowly.

"It's not entirely real either." Lex said in a matching speculative tone.

"Uncle D? Can we go for a ride before you have to go to your meeting?" Lucky asked hopefully as he pointed at the carousel which delineated one side of the entrance.

"You know, that sounds like a fantastic idea. We'll let these three take a minute to get their bearings while we have some fun." D said happily.

Lucky had more than half expected D to decline for some reason or another.

The boy was so happy that he was nearly skipping as D walked away with him toward the entrance to the ride.

* * * * *

"If you bring Zah Zah with us, make sure that you keep hold of her." D cautioned.

"She's not completely real, so she can do things that might hurt a real cat." Lucky explained as D paid the attendant at the entrance to the ride.

"Well, this carnival isn't completely real either. There's a very good chance that it's one of the few things that actually *could* hurt her." D said frankly.

Before Lucky could react, D hoisted him off his feet with one arm and swung him onto the carousel, which was already in full motion.

* * * * *

Lucky giggled with delight at the sensation of the wind rushing past him as the lights of the carnival hypnotically sparkled all around them.

"Hop on up here, Lucky. Once you're settled in, I'll get a horse of my own and join you." D said as he helped Lucky onto one of the carved wooden horses.

"You're going to ride too? I thought you'd just stand beside me." Lucky said honestly.

"Nah. You don't need for me to prop you up. Even though it may not feel like it sometimes, I know that you're old enough to ride on your own. But even so, I'll be right here beside you if you *do* need me for anything." D assured him before climbing aboard the neighboring horse.

As the carousel spun around, Lucky was able to catch sight of his new brothers, seriously discussing the reality of the carnival, or lack thereof.

He then glanced beside him to see D riding one of the wooden horses as comfortably as if he rode them to work every day.

A movement in his arms drew his attention and he looked down into Zah Zah's eyes.

"I don't know what's going to happen, but maybe since this place is half-real like you are, they might know how to make it so you can be around people without wanting to hurt them all the time." Lucky gently explained.

A low, half-hearted growl was Zah Zah's only response.

* * * * *

"How are you enjoying the ride so far?" D asked Lucky loudly, to be heard over the hurly-burly music.

"This is like a dream. It feels like I'm flying. I could do this forever." Lucky said happily.

"Knowing how this place works, that could probably be arranged." D said frankly, then carefully asked, "But is that something that you'd really want?"

"No. I guess not." Lucky reluctantly admitted, then explained, "It's nice to be able to do stuff with you and have you paying attention to just me. But I guess it wouldn't be right to throw out all the good things I have just to try and get one thing that I'm missing."

"You don't have to be missing anything. You're living with us now. I can give you my time and attention whenever you need it. Besides, if we stayed on the carousel, then you'd miss out on doing things with your brothers. I'm betting that the four of you are going to have some incredible adventures together." D said with a warm smile at the thought.

"I think maybe we're having one right now." Lucky said frankly.

"I think maybe you're right." D said conspiratorially, then asked, "Are you ready to get off of this thing?"

"Yeah. It felt crazy and exciting at first, but now it feels like we're just going in circles." Lucky said as he climbed off his horse.

"Lots of things in life can feel like that. It's good to be able to recognize them and be willing to do something about it." D said seriously before stepping off the carousel, leaving Lucky on his own.

* * * * *

Lucky cuddled Zah Zah close to his chest as he waited for the carousel to make another revolution.

The world seemed to be whizzing by at a dizzying speed and he was actually a little bit afraid of jumping off. Lucky felt his heart beating rapidly as the anxiety grew within him.

The music seemed as though it was becoming more of a seductive melody, drawing Lucky in to sway to the rhythm. The lights were becoming a bit softer as he waited for the carousel to complete a revolution so that he could jump off.

As the carousel continued to turn, the world outside appeared to be fading and becoming less real as the melody invited him to stay and sing along.

A low threatening growl snapped Lucky out of his thoughts and he looked down to find Zah Zah looking back at him impatiently.

"I guess forever like this wouldn't be something that you'd enjoy, would it?" Lucky quietly asked.

Zah Zah sniffed at him disgustedly as she shook her head violently, almost like a sneeze.

"Yeah. Me neither." Lucky admitted, then looked upward and said, "Thanks for the offer, but I can't. I have too much to do."

As soon as he said the words, the music returned to its discordant blaring and the world reformed to be as sharp and stark as it ever had been.

Lucky stepped off the carousel and directly to his beloved uncle's side, where he was promptly hugged around the shoulders.

"*Pity that. He had the most joyous vision I've seen in decades. He would've made an excellent carousel operator. Kept them entertained for years, he would.*"

* * * * *

"Have you boys come to any conclusions about the state of reality of this place, or are you going to be willing to accept it the way it is and enjoy it?" D asked as he kept an arm protectively around Lucky.

"I don't get why it's like this. The dynamics of the spell are insane." Paul said frankly.

"I should have known better than to ask." D said down to Lucky, then looked at Paul and asked, "Which part is giving you trouble?"

"I can get enough of the 'how' just by looking at it. The part I really can't get is the 'why'." Paul said frankly.

"You know that jacket project that you were all working on earlier? Think of this in comparison to that and see if you can find any similarities." D said frankly.

After a moment to consider, Paul reluctantly admitted, "I don't know what you're getting at."

"Just keep it in mind and hopefully it will begin to make sense as we go along." D said as he motioned for the boys to walk with him down the midway.

"Too bad we can't eat anything. That looks good." G said as he pointed at a booth of sweet treats.

"If there's something you really want, you can buy some and take it back to the train with us and eat it there. The spell will be nullified if you eat it in our realm." D said frankly.

"Knowing that there's a spell on it makes me not want it quite as much." G reluctantly admitted.

"So we brought our own realm with us?" Paul asked curiously.

"That's one of the reasons that I prefer to come here by train. After an exciting evening at the carnival, we can go back to a place where it's safe for us to relax and let down our guard for a while." D said seriously.

"What about that one? Can we go in there?" Lucky asked hopefully as he pointed at one of the attractions.

"I don't have any interest in going, but you might be able to talk your brothers into it." D said honestly.

"Lex? Do you want to?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"Sure. I guess so." Lex said uncertainly.

"What about you, G? Do you want to go with me?" Lucky asked pleadingly.

"Yeah. Why not?" G said easily.

"Do you want to go with us, Paul? It'll be fun!" Lucky asked with a hopeful smile, turned up full blast.

"I think I'll hang back with Dad. You guys go ahead and enjoy." Paul said with a sincere, tranquil smile.

"Uncle D, do you think it's okay for Zah Zah, Mah Zah and Zephyr to go in there too?" Lucky asked curiously.

"Since I know that all three of them will fight to defend you, I think it's probably a good idea." D said seriously.

Having received his answer, Lucky prodded and cajoled his brothers forward.

* * * * *

"It's an illusion trap, isn't it?" Paul asked his father curiously.

"Of course it is." D said simply.

"Do you think they'll fall for it?" Paul asked as he watched Lucky paying his entry fee.

"No. Not really. But I think it may cause them to see a use for illusions that they may not have considered before."

"I can see that with G, but what about Lex and Lucky?" Paul asked curiously.

"They both have access to Sorcery, so they'll have the capacity to make some discoveries of their own. I get the sense that this adventure could turn out to be valuable for any or all of them." D said frankly.

"Okay. I guess I can get that but... a hall of mirrors? Seriously?" Paul asked with a pained look at his father.

"I *did* say something earlier about them being flagrant, didn't I?" D asked in his defense.

* * * * *

"Okay. This isn't as fun as I thought it would be. I keep running into the glass." Lucky said frustratedly.

Zah Zah meowed up at him impatiently in response.

"I am *not* a dumbass! It's just hard for me to see what's a mirror and what's a doorway and what's a glass wall in this dim light." Lucky said as he fought to navigate the maze.

"And this is supposed to be... *fun*?" G asked uncertainly.

"*I could show you the way out. Then everyone would know that you're the smartest.*" A low voice said close to Lex's ear, causing him to turn suddenly.

Lex was surprised to see another version of himself that *wasn't* G.

He experimentally raised a hand and wasn't surprised to see his mirror image do the same.

"Lucky, you know how to make a light, don't you?" G asked casually.

"Yeah. But I don't think you're supposed to in here. It might spoil someone else's fun." Lucky carefully explained.

"G, hold on for a second. There's someone in here with us who looks like me and I don't think it's you."

"I'm the one with the ginormous spider on his shoulder. It's kinda hard to miss me." G said frankly.

"*You don't have to tell anyone. I can help you prove that you're faster, stronger and smarter than all of them. The others never need to know.*" His reflected self said in a coaxing tone.

"This definitely isn't you... and it's not me." Lex slowly reasoned.

"Lucky, you didn't make a copy of Lex just now, did you?" G asked curiously.

"No. Why would I?" Lucky asked reasonably.

"Then I guess it must be someone else." G said slowly.

"Is it an exact copy of you?" Lucky asked curiously.

"The light's not very good in here. I guess it looks like me." Lex said uncertainly.

"We can make some more light if you need us to." Lucky cautiously offered.

Just then some fireballs appeared around G, but just as suddenly as they were created, they were extinguished.

"Mah Zah's fireballs didn't work and I tried doing some Wizard's Lights, but something about the mirror's in here just seems to eat up their light." G said frankly.

"Zah Zah can make good light! Let her help you!" Lucky said excitedly.

"Sure. Go ahead. We're not too proud to accept help." Lex automatically said as he also attempted to make a cloud of Wizard's Lights with no better result than G.

"Come on Zah Zah! Do like you did in the train engine. Show them that you've got the best light power of anybody here." Lucky said encouragingly.

"You'd better hurry. I think I just saw another me and I don't think he's the same one as the last me." Lex said cautiously.

A strange flickering, fluttering glow began to rise up from the floor by Lucky's feet, where Zah Zah was located.

All around them, a flurry of glowing white moths began to fly up in leaps and bounds.

As the moths spread out over the ceiling, the lighting became reasonably bright and more or less steady all around them.

"Now, let's have a good look at you." G said as he moved to block a person from moving away from Lex.

"I guess he *doesn't* look like me once you look at him in a good light. The illusion is fading." Lex admitted.

"I think *she* was just trying to freak you out while you were stumbling around in the dark, probably trying to get you to agree to ask for her help." G said frankly.

"It's not fair. I didn't stand a chance. You already had a doppelganger." The poor facsimile of Lex pouted.

"How fair is this?" G asked as he went through the short form version of his self-portrait spell.

When Lex saw what he was doing, he decided to do the same.

Not to be outdone, Lucky did his own unique variation of their self-portrait casting.

The three identical clones didn't move, but each of them were a testament to the skill level of their caster.

"So, what do you guys think? Did we out-mirror the mirror?" G asked as his clown smirk covered his face.

"You're a clown too? Of course you are! Stupid clowns think they're better than everyone else." The poor imitation of Lex pouted.

"That's only because we are." G said teasingly.

"You're no fun!" The would-be copy of Lex said indignantly as she shouldered past them and stomped away.

After a moment to be sure that she was gone, Lucky cautiously asked, "Do you want to go back now?"

"No. We can keep going. I'd like to see what's at the center of this thing, and besides, I'm beginning to see the fun in it."

Chapter 19

"D? Is that you?" A naked bluish-gray man asked as he crab-walked impossibly low to the ground toward them.

"Bob? How are you doing?" D asked delightedly.

"You know how it is, not enough hours in the day." Bob said wearily.

"I know exactly what you mean." D said sincerely, then pleasantly asked, "How are the wife and kids?"

"Oh, they're fine. They're all over at her mother's, picking herbs for her and most likely trying to eat her out of house and home in the process." Bob finished with a fond chuckle.

"I'm sure that Maude is loving every minute of it." D said warmly, then continued, "Bob, you already know Mr. Sticks and I'd like to introduce my son, Paul."

"Sticks! Looking good!" Bob said pleasantly to the little stick man, then turned to D and said more slowly, "Paul? Somehow I got it in my head that your boy was named Gwayne."

"He is. Paul is my new wife's son. I've adopted him." D said as he gave Paul a brief hug from the side.

Paul wasn't sure why the naked blue-skinned man with glowing eyes didn't set off a single warning bell within him. In point of fact, Paul felt as relaxed in Bob's company as if they had been childhood friends.

"I heard that you and Em didn't work out. Everyone here was rooting for you two." Bob said sincerely.

"I know. I kept holding on to the notion that the two of us could survive anything together, regardless of the twists and turns life threw in our way. I think that might have been part of our undoing. I was completely blindsided. I wasn't able to keep the marriage going, all on my own, after she lost interest." D quietly explained.

"Well, if you've remarried and adopted a son, I guess it means that you were able to move on. Good for you. I'm glad to hear that things are working out for you." Bob said honestly.

"They are, but I've allowed my personal matters to keep me from my duties to Frakish Vallum for far too long, so I decided to kill two birds with one stone and bring the boys to experience the carnival while I check in to see how everyone's doing."

"Mmm... killed birds... Did you bring any with you?" Bob asked hopefully.

"No. I didn't know I'd be running into you, so I didn't think to bring any snacks." D said repentantly.

"No. Of course not." Bob said with evident disappointment.

Paul noticed that Mr. Sticks seemed to be intently listening to the conversation. Although Paul didn't know how a person with no face could look 'interested', Mr. Sticks seemed to be hanging onto their every word.

"Have you met the new boss yet?" Bob asked curiously.

"No. I've heard that her name is Sanguine Night, but that's all I know about her." D said honestly.

"I can't say that I know that much about her myself. So far, she seems to pay most attention to the features and doesn't bother much with the background players like me." Bob said frankly.

"I would think that you'd prefer it to be that way." D said simply.

"Probably, yeah." Bob agreed, then explained, "I wouldn't want her watching me all the time and telling me my business. But it might be nice if she'd deign to speak to someone like me, just to let us know that we're appreciated for what we do."

"What do you do?" Paul asked curiously.

Before Bob could answer, D turned to his son and gently explained, "He's a freelance performer. Between shows, he'll roam around the carnival, talking to people, making sure that they're enjoying themselves and pointing them in the right direction to make the most of their experience."

"Like what I'm doing now." Bob interjected.

"Right. But up on stage, he might perform with the clowns or the acrobats. He can add a little exotic spice to just about any act to keep it from becoming stale." D said with pride for his friend's contribution.

"Thank you for saying so. That really lifts my spirits." Bob said appreciatively, then suddenly added, "I need to be going. This is one of the few times when my participation in something has actually been planned in advance."

"Really? What do you have going on, if I may ask?" D asked with interest.

"The fairy dance troop are going to have a big formal medieval dance recital, and we decided that at just about the point where most of the attendees start losing interest, I'll creep in there and they'll switch to the Jitterbug." Bob said happily.

"That sounds like a lot of fun. Let me see what my boys feel like doing. We might decide to attend." D said seriously.

"That'd be great! I hope to see you there!" Bob said happily, then hurried to add, "It was nice to meet you Paul. I hope you have a good time while you're here. Mr. Sticks, a pleasure as always. I've got to go!"

Before Paul could respond, Bob skittered away at a surprising rate of speed.

After a moment to consider, Paul quietly said, "He seemed nice."

"Most of the people here are, as long as you're willing to overlook a few idiosyncrasies." D said frankly.

"Like what?" Paul asked curiously.

"Different things for different people. In Bob's case, physical attributes aside, you just have to accept that he's open to eating just about anything, even things not usually thought of as food." D said diplomatically.

"Living things?" Paul guessed.

"I get the sense that Bob doesn't make much of a distinction when it comes to that." D said honestly.

"But weren't you saying that accepting people despite their idiosyncrasies is what caused your marriage not to work out?" Paul asked curiously.

"Nothing is ever that simple, but I admit that it played a part. Being willing to overlook perceived character flaws can open doors and bridge divides between people and is generally looked upon as a virtue. But, at the same time, ignoring blatant warning signs and deluding oneself with wishful thinking, despite all reason, has consequences."

"Do you think we should go in after the guys?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No. The hall of mirrors is a maze. It takes some time to get through it whether the mirrors are playing with you or not."

"I wonder how Agent Roberts would do in a place like this, considering how Obby is."

"I've already invited Shawn back to visit one of these days. If he decides to take us up on it, it might be interesting to find out."

* * * * *

"Hey! Where did you go? I can't see you." G suddenly called out.

"You sound like you're right next to me, but I can't see you either. I can't see either one of you... I can't even see myself. I wouldn't think that was even possible in a hall of mirrors." Lex said frankly.

"Lucky? Are you alright?" G asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I've got Zah Zah with me, so I'm safe. I just got turned around. I don't know which way to go." Lucky said seriously.

"Give me a second to work on that. There's an illusion at work here, I just have to figure out how it's deceiving us so I'll know how to outmaneuver it."

"I think it's something in the reflections." Lex said slowly.

"Hall of mirrors." G reminded him, then thought to add, "Duh."

"I was just saying that the magic isn't directed at us, it's a spell targeting the shared reality within the reflections." Lex said frankly.

"Right. They're either frozen or they're out of sync with the real world." G said seriously.

"I just saw my doppelganger again and I think she might have been moving backwards." Lex said carefully.

"Paul's a lot better at seeing through things like this. But I can handle it. I think this comes with being the alpha. Sometimes I have to step up." G said as his clown features came in fully.

"Lucky, you might want to hold on to Zah Zah and keep her close. I have a feeling that if G lets loose, this could get intense." Lex said as he took Zephyr off his shoulder and clutched him to his chest.

"You'd think that the forces running a hall of mirrors would know better. You never try to out-crazy a clown." G said as he slowly raised his arms with obvious effort.

As he did so, every mirror in the hall of mirrors began playing abrupt meaningless flashes of the thousands of beings who had passed by them.

Some of the scenes were of private moments, some were violent, and some were obvious dreams that had been magically recreated to trick or trap the guests.

"If you attack a clown, you'd best take him down. Otherwise, you'll pay the price." G said as he suddenly lowered his arms.

As he did so, every mirror in the place suddenly went still and silent, becoming nothing more than blank panes of glass.

After a long silent moment, Lucky took a tentative step in the dimly lit maze before cautiously asking, "You did more than kill the mirrors, didn't you?"

"A little. I also sorted out the perception of reality within these walls, basic sorcery stuff." G said frankly, then thought to add, "We can just follow the light and it should take us to the exit, if you're ready to go."

"So you broke their ride?" Lucky asked with concern as he took another step to examine the result of G's action.

"If I let them get away with attacking me, I would have been letting down all clowns everywhere."

"Since my doppelganger knew that you were a clown, there was no excuse for them to keep going. They could have let you finish the ride without trying to trap you and no one would have had a problem." Lex said in support of his look-alike.

"But you're here just this once. If you leave them with all their mirrors broken you've stopped them from doing wrong, but you've also stopped them from being able to do right. This isn't teaching them a lesson, it's destroying them." Lucky implored them to understand as he clutched Zah Zah firmly to his chest.

Lex almost felt sympathy for the nightmare cat creature, being held so tightly... strangled, really.

"That was a full-out sorcery that I just did. The flow of magic was kind of like pouring water out of a pitcher onto a table. It's a lot easier to pour it out than it is to put it back." G said frankly.

"To fix it, they're probably going to have to unbind the reality of this space, then go through this entire place and reroot each mirror, one at a time." Lex said quietly.

"I don't want this place to go away just because they were being stupid for a minute. Even if I wasn't good at it, the mirrors and mazes were still fun." Lucky said seriously.

"I get what you're saying, but what's done is done. It's really out of our hands now." G said frankly.

"If we can't undo what you did, maybe we can do something else. I just wish there was some way that we could make it so people could still enjoy this place and have fun here." Lucky said seriously.

"Whoa. What the hell was that?" Lex asked as he looked around suddenly and instinctively fought for balance, even though the building hadn't physically shaken.

"That was a swell of magic. But I don't think it was sorcery. It felt bigger... older." G cautiously answered somewhat breathlessly as he carefully surveyed his surroundings.

"I think I did something." Lucky said in a slow, trembling voice.

"You're too old to have wishcraft. But if I didn't know better, I'd say that's what just happened here." Lex said frankly.

"If it is wishcraft, they should have caught it before he was allowed to start school. Witches who can't control their magic even that much can't be allowed out into the world." G said slowly, then turned suddenly as he saw someone silently walk past them, out of the corner of his eye.

"We've already figured out that his old school sucked. So I have no problem believing that they didn't detect it." Lex said honestly, then fell silent as a low, not-too-distant voice caught his attention.

"It still doesn't add up. If he was prone to wishcraft it would have leaked out sometime before this. Whatever just happened has to be something else. Maybe it's some kind of enchantment on this area of space that's too deep for me to detect." G

said speculatively, then jerked around as he saw a movement in one of the empty mirrors near him.

Before he could investigate, the panes of glass began showing people walking, taking no notice of them. It looked for all the world like they were just walking normally, going about their day, on the other side of the glass.

"That's weird. All of a sudden it seems really crowded in here." Lex said anxiously.

"Yeah, but this is something going on inside the individual mirrors. I'm not detecting any illusion being cast on us or even on the space around us." G said carefully.

A barely perceptible murmur began to swell as the people seemed to be moving faster and crowding in more tightly.

"Lucky? I lost you again. Where'd you go?" Lex asked loudly, as he moved toward Lucky's last known location.

"I don't know, but I'm okay. Zah Zah says that she can show me how to get out. We can't stay in here, it's getting too loud and too crazy. We'll meet you outside." Lucky screamed from somewhere nearby.

"Go ahead and we'll meet you out there." Lex confirmed, then called to his other side, "G? Did you get that?"

"Yeah. Mah Zah says that she can lead me out of here if you'll be okay on your own." G responded loudly to be heard over the clamor of voices all around them. G instinctively tucked his arms in close to avoid the perceived crowd.

"Go on. We'll catch up." Lex said seriously, then looked down and told the little horse monster in his arms, "If you can find a chunk of Lapis Lazuli, I know you'll be able to find the exit door."

A singular nod was Zephyr's response as he wriggled around enough to get loose from Lex's grasp.

As soon as Zephyr was standing on his own, he turned and flared his eyes red for a brief moment before leading the way out.

* * * * *

"That was a hall of mirrors, wasn't it? You guys look like you've just been on a roller coaster." Paul said with concern as he watched Lucky, Lex, and G stumbling out of the hall of mirrors, seeming to be out of breath.

"It wasn't that scary to begin with, it was actually kinda lame. But I think Lucky just 'wished' it up to about eleven on the anxiety scale." Lex said frankly.

"If you want a way to get your nerves rattled, you could do a lot worse." G nervously chuckled.

"Hold on. Go back to the part about Lucky. Is everything alright?" D asked with concern.

"I kinda wished for something and then what I wished for happened without me having to think about what it was or cast a spell to make it happen or anything." Lucky carefully explained.

"But he's too old for wishcraft." G interjected.

"If you made a wish inside the hall of mirrors, it might seem to have been granted by way of an illusion. That's how things here typically work." D cautioned him to understand.

"No." G stated emphatically, then explained, "I'm not saying that they didn't use magic, but whatever they did wasn't illusion or any other form of sorcery. I'd know if it was."

"I'm still not convinced that it's not some kind of wishcraft." Lex said thoughtfully.

"What makes you think that?" D asked curiously.

"I don't have anything solid. But I think that if we take a minute to look back at things with wishcraft in mind, we might be able to come up with some kind of a pattern that we didn't notice while it was happening." Lex said reasonably.

"Lucky? Can you remember any wishes that you've made recently?" G asked cautiously.

"No. Not really." Lucky said uncertainly.

"What about before Zah Zah could think for herself? Did you ever wish that she could be alive or intelligent or anything like that?" Paul asked cautiously.

"Well, yeah. I guess. I mean, I always wished that." Lucky reluctantly admitted.

"Okay. That doesn't prove anything, but let's keep that in mind." Paul announced to the group.

"What about me? Did you ever wish that I was alive?" Lex reluctantly asked.

"Yeah." Lucky said hesitantly.

"Yeah? That's it?" Lex asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah. When I saw you after G finished making you, I kinda wished that..." Lucky trailed off shyly.

"What did you wish, Lucky? Tell us as much as you can remember." Paul said gently, recognizing the boy's vulnerable state.

"Since Lex was new and didn't know anyone yet, I wished that he could get to know me and that we could somehow be friends." Lucky finally admitted.

"Was that before or after the train ride and the picnic?" Lex asked curiously.

"Both." Lucky answered, then added, "I wished it before, but after me and Mom and Star went back home, I wished it again... and that I could come back here and live with you... all of you."

"It still doesn't prove anything. It could just be coincidence." G said cautiously.

"Yeah. And everything else in the world that ever happens could be coincidence too, without any of it being related to each other at all." Paul said frankly.

"Save it for the train." D interrupted, to forestall any further exploration of that conversation thread, then calmly said, "Right now our objective is to assess our situation so that we can decide what we're going to do in the short term. We can consider longer term matters when we're more able to relax and take our time."

"Lucky's wishes come true. That's our situation." G said simply.

"I think we can dive a little deeper into it than that." D said with a smile.

"He's a child of the sun." Lex offered weakly.

"Which means..." D prompted.

"We haven't really figured that part out yet." Lex reluctantly admitted.

"Tell us what you've discovered so far. Maybe if we put our heads together, it'll start to make sense."

"There's not much to tell." Lex cautioned.

"Good. Then we'll get back to enjoying the carnival that much sooner." D said simply.

"Okay, from what Doctor Williams said, the mimic thing and the nonstandard magic thing are both part of it." Lex said carefully.

"I figured." Paul said simply.

"Okay, I also found this ancient story... I think you could literally call it a 'Fairy Tale'. It said that 'The Children of the Sun' moved in on some fairies and ended up taking over their entire realm."

"If there's a whole realm of Children of the Sun somewhere, we should have heard about them before now." D said speculatively.

"No. Only the first generation invaders were called Children of the Sun. Their children were witches." Lex explained.

"So, what you're saying is that the offspring of two Children of the Sun is a witch?" D asked curiously.

"No. Um, I think the way it works is that the offspring of a Child of the Sun and a fairy ends up being a witch... somehow." Lex finished weakly.

"So the Children of the Sun showed up, intermarried with the locals and eventually ended up taking over the entire realm?" D asked speculatively.

"That's the story that they told." Lex said noncommittally.

"Who is 'they'?" Paul asked curiously.

After a long, puzzled moment, Lex cautiously asked, "What do you mean?"

"If the fairies were all driven out of their home, who wrote the story? The witch descendants, or the fairies who were driven out?" Paul asked carefully.

"I don't know. I guess it could be either one, passing their history down to their descendants." Lex said uncertainly.

"It doesn't matter. Did anything in your fairy tale have anything to do with 'The Children of the Sun' and wish fulfillment?" D asked seriously.

"No. At least not in the part that I read. I didn't get to finish it." Lex said weakly.

"Did Doctor Williams have anything else to say about it?" Paul slowly asked.

"He just told us that it was an actual thing. He could see it or something, in his magnifying glass prism thing." Lex said uncertainly.

"But he didn't seem worried about it?" D asked cautiously.

"No. He seemed surprised. He even asked Doctor Coker to double-check him to see that he was reading it right. But he didn't act like it was dangerous or any big deal, just kinda rare." Lex confirmed.

"Doctor Williams said that when I get older that I'll probably find a problem that no one else can solve and I'll use my special kind of magic to become the solution." Lucky eagerly added.

After a long quiet moment, Lex cautiously said, "He did say that."

"So what Lucky did just now, was that like a practice run for what he's going to be doing later on?" G asked the group speculatively.

"Perhaps." D slowly answered, then continued, "It could also be an attribute of who and what he is. This trait might be what makes him something other than a witch."

"I thought it was like another kind of witch." Paul said honestly.

"I don't know if there's a definitive answer for that, but if not 'something other', then certainly 'something more'." D said frankly.

"So have we figured out enough to know what we're doing next?" G asked curiously.

"Before I answer, do you think the people in the hall of mirrors are going to have just cause to be angry with whatever was done in there?" D asked cautiously.

"That's hard to say." G answered honestly.

Lex nodded and continued for him, "If anyone had too big a problem with it, they probably would have been out here raising hell with us about it by now."

"Unless they're too scared of us." Lucky quietly added.

"That'd work too." G said simply.

At Paul's surprised look, G explained, "Clown, carnival, do the math. I have to be seen as strong here, the same as you would if we were in a demon realm."

"Oh? I didn't get that before." Paul said with surprise, then continued, "If that's how it is, then you should probably 'Clown Out' now so that no one will have any doubt if you're for real or not. Otherwise they might think you're just some poser playing dress-up."

"I kept telling myself that it didn't matter and that I didn't have anything to prove. But I have a feeling that, for as long as I'm here, this is how it has to be. If you want to be counted among the clowns, you have to be a clown." G said as not only did his facial features become wildly exaggerated, but his clothing seemed to change in a similar manner.

"So, do you have this clown guy living inside you all the time, just waiting to come out?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I don't know how it all works. But I don't think there's a clown hiding inside me as much as the clown represents a part of my nature that I can bring forward to deal with certain situations. You become a Pegasus, I become a clown."

"But there are other clowns who can't choose." Paul said speculatively.

"Maybe non-witch clowns don't have the same choice... Or maybe they've already chosen." G suggested, then qualified, "Like I said, I don't know how it all works."

"Well, that's as good an explanation of it as any I've heard." D said frankly.

"So, are we ready to get back to the carnival now?" Paul cautiously asked.

"I think that depends on these three. What do you say, boys?"

"What do we say about what?" G asked, now completely outfitted in clown regalia from head to toe.

"Are you comfortable leaving the situation with the hall of mirrors as it is?" D asked seriously.

"If the guys want to do something about it, I'll support them. But as far as I'm concerned, everything is settled." G said frankly.

"I'm good." Lex immediately chimed in.

"I already made things be the way I think they should be. If they've got a problem with it, they can come and talk to us about it." Lucky said sincerely.

"Then I suppose that we can..." D said before noticing someone waiting to gain his attention.

In that moment, the boys turned as one to follow D's curious gaze.

"Prince Maltese, what can I do for you this evening?" D asked pleasantly.

The clown seemed to be unusually quiet without his frenetic juggling.

"Miss Night wishes to meet with you. I can take you to her whenever you are ready." The clown said slowly as more and more of his attention seemed to be focused on G.

"We seem to be between crises at the moment. I suppose now would be as good a time as any." D said frankly.

"Excuse me for asking, but am I to understand that one of your children is actually a clown?" The Prince, Maltese, asked uncertainly.

"Yes. We've always assumed that he got that from his mother's side of the family." D said frankly.

"You obviously accept your son as he is, that's not always the case. You have my respect, good sir." the Prince, Maltese, said formally.

D expected them to start walking once the clown had his answers, but the Prince, Maltese, seemed to be frozen, staring at G.

"Was there something more?" D asked hesitantly.

"Yes. I'm sorry, but I'm curious to know, where does the spider doll fit into your overall aesthetic?" The clown asked G curiously.

"Mah Zah's not a doll." G said as the enormous spider on his shoulder reared back and exposed her rather formidable jaws, which looked very much like fangs. The hiss Mah Zah emitted sent a chill up each and every spine present.

The Prince, Maltese, stepped back as he hurriedly said, "No disrespect. I was simply curious to know what theme you were attempting to project. The rest of your outfit is whimsical yet your... pet gives off a more... macabre vibe."

"She's not a pet, she's a demonic wizard who has chosen to travel with me. She just looks like a spider because it pleases her to do so." G said seriously, then continued, "As for me... I understand what you were asking and that you meant no insult. Maybe I should do something to coordinate our styles. How's this?"

As G said the words, he made a sweeping gesture and all the color seemed to drain out of his floppy whimsical clothes. Then they seemed to alter their shape to mimic the appearance of a one-piece suit. The light glimmered off the finest threads of silver throughout which could barely be seen, appearing to wrap around him in a spiderweb pattern moving up his body.

The other significant change in appearance was to G's hair. While it remained the same 'dark chocolate' color that it had always been, the style significantly changed to closely resemble Mah Zah's spiky spider fur.

"We're going to have to come here more often. I like what it does to you." Paul said with a slight smile and a leer in G's direction.

G responded with a quick smile back at him.

"Now that we have G sorted out, maybe we should go pay our respects to Ms. Night." D said seriously.

"She seemed to be pleased to hear that you're visiting. She's done well, taking the carnival in a productive direction." The Prince, Maltese, said as he started leading the way.

"How so?" D asked curiously.

"Mr. Never seemed to focus a lot of attention on attracting the right element to the carnival so that he could recruit from the best of the best. It appears that Miss Night would rather have something for everyone and sort through the masses in hopes of finding suitable candidates." The Prince, Maltese, said frankly.

"Candidates for what?" Lex asked curiously.

"To join us."

"This could be an amazing opportunity for the right person. They could have an opportunity to do something that they enjoy, essentially forever." D said seriously.

"Are you saying that the people here don't age?" Paul asked cautiously.

"That's right. And you'll never die of natural causes here, either." D confirmed.

"But if the realm doesn't like you, then you become their food." G said darkly.

"There is an element of risk." D conceded.

"This is Miss Night's office. I will introduce you, then I'll return to my duties at the main gate. I can't wait to tell the other clowns about you. The story of the clown with a wizard spider on his shoulder might inspire them to step up their game a little." The Prince, Maltese, said with obvious admiration.

"You might also want to mention that I'm a 'sorcerer'." G said as he raised his hands and the world around them seemed to vanish.

"I've heard that every type of people, from fairies to ogres, have clowns, but while I know that clowns with magical heritage aren't uncommon, I don't think I've ever heard of a master of high-magic, like sorcery, being a clown before." The Prince, Maltese, said honestly.

"Then know me. This is what I see when I dream." G said as the emptiness surrounding them began to fill in with different images, many of which seemed familiar to Paul.

Lucky was amazed by the carnival posters from G's room, migrated into the 3rd dimension and brought to life. The deep dark red and gold were only revealed by flickering firelight.

Paul winced at a particularly loud blaring calliope playing nearby as various grotesqueries were ambling around them, going about their business.

"This part of you isn't part of me. My memory of this part of your life is faded and distant." Lex said uneasily.

"G, what are you doing?" D asked with evident concern.

"Just showing a fellow clown what I'm capable of. If there's ever a time when the clowns are called into action, there won't be any question about what I'm bringing to the table." G said seriously.

"Not to mention your wizard spider." The Prince, Maltese added with a smile at Mah Zah.

"I don't command Mah Zah. She fights her own battles for her own reasons." G said firmly.

"Even so, I will be delighted to explain to our brothers and sisters what you bring to us." The Prince, Maltese, said sincerely.

G lowered his hands and the illusion surrounding them fell away, revealing the carnival, just as it had been when they stopped walking.

The Prince, Maltese, stepped forward and gently knocked on the wooden door of what appeared to have once been the carriage from a horse drawn cart.

"Come." An alto feminine voice called.

* * * * *

"Miss Sanguine Night, it's my honor and pleasure to introduce D, the keeper of the second gate and his children, Paul, Lex, Lucky, and the dark-sorcerer clown, G." The Prince, Maltese, said reverently.

"A more intriguing introduction than I was expecting. Please, come in and be comfortable. We appear to have a few minutes before our next guests arrive." Miss Night said as she stood from behind her desk.

The one piece of furniture that dominated the room beyond all others was the large hourglass beside her desk.

All of them noticed that the sand in it was only minutes away from completely running out.

"I don't have any real business to discuss. I just wanted to introduce myself and offer my assurance that I will be available, if there is any assistance I can provide in my capacity as keeper of the second gate." D said professionally.

"To be honest, I haven't had cause to even consider your realm or your gate since assuming my duties. Recently we detected a disturbance in the continuum that

might have occurred near or within your realm, but everything seems to have resolved itself since." Miss Night said seriously.

"That most likely has to do with a project the boys were working on this past week. If that's the case, there shouldn't be any further disruption." D finished with a smile at the boys.

"Would you like to go outside to witness the arrival? It's nearly that time and it really is quite a spectacle." Miss Night asked pleasantly.

"Yes. I think the boys would not only enjoy witnessing the grand event itself, but also appreciate the artistry of such an ancient manipulation." D said with a smile.

"Few get to witness the arrival of the autumn carnival when it blows into town, but to see it from the inside is a rarity to the extreme." Miss Night said as she walked past her guests to lead the way out of her office.

Chapter 20

"What are we doing?" Paul quietly asked his father as they stepped out of the office.

"Watch and listen. Once you've witnessed this, I'll answer any questions that you still have." D said as they walked with Miss Night away from her office and onto the midway.

"What are we looking for?" G asked, appearing to be perfectly at home in his 'dark clown' persona.

"Watch the entryway, where we came in." D said as he pointed with his free hand.

Lex noticed that people all over the carnival had stopped what they were doing and had their attention focused on the main carnival entrance.

The horizon seemed to blur in a gust of wind and burnt-orange haze. What had been a barren forest had seemingly transformed into an equally barren desert. Some dry sparse weeds and gnarled stunted trees surrounded the entryway, leading off into an arid sandy twilight of infinite nothing.

"What happened to the forest? Is the train still there?" Paul asked D seriously.

"The train is still right where we left it, however *we* are no longer in the same realm that it is." D said carefully.

"So we're stuck here?" Paul asked to confirm.

"No. Not at all. There are several methods for us to return to the train *or* to the Earth realm, any of which are easily accomplished. The only thing I would warn you against is leaving the carnival by way of the road in front of us. Not only will that take you fully into another realm, but there is every likelihood that once you stepped through, the doorway would close behind you and you would be stranded there." D said seriously.

"Where?" Lex asked curiously.

"You'll have to ask Miss Night about that. This realm isn't one that I'm familiar with." D said frankly.

"Please call me Sanguine." Miss Night said to D warmly, then turned her attention to Lex and explained, "The carnival dimension is in the process of merging with the Oasis of Castor, in the third realm of Tinea."

Before Lex could ask *exactly* what that meant, the hall of mirrors suddenly transformed from a free-standing building to a large colorful tent.

"We're not just opening a door to that place, the carnival is merging into their reality, almost like one of G's sorcery overlays." Paul cautiously deduced from the evidence at hand.

"Exactly, except that it's not an illusion, remind you of anything?" D asked with a grin.

"They did a changey on the entire carnival?" Lex asked in amazement.

"But, like with Mr. Sticks, the adaptation makes the people of the carnival realm actually become part of whatever realm they're visiting." Paul said speculatively.

"Not entirely and not permanently." Sanguine said firmly.

"Another of the ancient magics grants everyone in the carnival the ability to speak and understand the language of the realm that we're visiting." D added seriously.

"The magic only lasts for as long as the realms are merged." Sanguine continued, then further explained, "When the realms separate, most will be sorted to the realm which has the greater claim on them. Those equally claimed by both realms will be drawn by both and their disposition will need to be adjudicated. One person may struggle to end up in the realm of his choice while another may ultimately end up having their wish fulfilled with little to no effort on their part. And while I am sometimes called upon to intervene in such matters, I actually have very little to do with the outcome. Ultimately, the realms decide."

"This sounds like one of those things where, after visiting here, someone spends the rest of their life trying to find the carnival again so that they can reclaim their long-lost love." Paul said melodramatically.

"How tragically romantic. However, while that *could* happen, love is only one of the many incentives that this place has to offer to make a person desperate to return... or want to stay forever." Sanguine said frankly.

"Let me guess. Things like greed? Wrath?... Pride, maybe?" Paul asked knowingly.

"Ah, the classics. You have good instincts." Sanguine said with a smile, then quietly added, "If you ever feel like getting away from it all, I might be able to find a position for someone with your vision."

"Rule number one. You don't get to recruit my kids." D said firmly, but with enough of a smile to indicate that he wasn't really angry.

"From what I've heard, two of your sons have already declined generous offers from us." Sanguine said informatively.

"Do I need to take my sons back home to protect them?" D asked cautiously.

"No. of course not. It wasn't personal against you or your children. Those were enchantments built into the attractions; they were automatic. I was simply letting Paul know that I appreciate his perspective and that I think he has a mindset that would do well here." Sanguine explained while keeping watch on the blowing sand outside the carnival entrance.

"Thank you?" Paul said uncertainly.

D seemed to be both relieved and amused at Paul's reaction.

"Ah! Here it comes. Hold on." Sanguine said as she appeared to be getting shorter.

"What's happening?" Lucky asked anxiously as not only the buildings but also the people began to transform.

The carousel that he and his Uncle D had ridden earlier had transformed into a significantly shorter, although slightly more elaborate affair where the horses were no longer horses, but something more serpentine, with several wings and many sharp teeth on display.

"Uncle D? Is it safe for us to be here?" Lucky asked anxiously as he moved closer to D's side.

"Yes. It's fine. Just be sure to pay careful attention to what's going on around you and be ready to step out of the way if need be." D warned him.

"Sanguine, are you alright?" Lex asked with concern.

"I'm fine. This is my way of adapting to the realm, I change to resemble one of their natives." Sanguine gently explained.

"Are we going to change like that too?" Lucky asked anxiously.

"I will." D said simply as the boys noticed that the beginning of his change was already underway.

"But if you didn't have Mr. Sticks, you wouldn't be changing now." Paul asked speculatively.

"Correct." D said simply, looking strangely dignified for someone with gray skin and long ears.

"Everyone who arrives with the carnival will be able to speak the native language. But only those bound to the Carnival realm will be adapted. Guests from outside both realms will remain themselves and will most likely end up being some of the more curious attractions for our visitors." Sanguine said seriously.

"But what are you changing into?" Paul asked curiously.

"The people are called The Huell. They are said to be the offspring of donkeys and goblins, although I suspect that that's a story people came up with to explain their appearance. I seriously doubt that there's a word of truth in it." Sanguine finished with a smile.

"Donkey goblins?" G asked dubiously.

"I think Sanguine's right. I have a hard time believing that any... well, *many* Goblins had intimate relations with donkeys." D said uncomfortably, then qualified, "Or, at least not enough to populate an oasis."

"I personally believe that The Huell are goblins who, over time, have adapted to living and doing hard labor in the harsh desert climate. But I suppose they might just as easily be the result of some witch's curse." Sanguine said frankly.

The blowing sand outside the carnival finally seemed to ease a little and beyond the stunted, gnarled trees was a village made up of many free-standing stone buildings as well as some relatively large tents.

"Considering your unusual appearance, the guests from the oasis will probably assume that you are members of the carnival. If you'd like, you can choose to play along and help entertain our guests. Who knows? It might make for an interesting diversion for you."

"Can we?" Lucky asked D beside him and was surprised to find that D was now shorter than he was.

"Yes. Of course." D immediately responded.

"Lex, do you want to?" Lucky asked excitedly.

"Do I want to, *what*?" Lex asked hesitantly.

Rather than answer verbally, Lucky enacted his 'changey', then smoothly transitioned from his humanoid form to his Pegasus centaur form.

"Oh, that." Lex said with surprise, then stammered, "Yeah. Give me a second."

Doing much as Lucky had done, Lex did his changey, then smoothly transformed into his unicorn centaur form.

"You wanna ride up here with me?" Lex asked down to Zephyr.

After a moment to consider, the green and black horse monster slowly took to the air leaving a faint trail of ocean spray in his wake.

As the others watched, Zephyr eventually came to rest on Lex's shoulder and somehow wordlessly gave the impression of being the one in charge of their partnership.

"Do you want to ride on my back, Zah Zah?" Lucky asked hopefully.

After looking at him with her too-human eyes for a moment, Zah Zah jumped from a standstill and landed effortlessly on Lucky's horseback. After a moment to assess her situation, she curled up and put her head down, seeming in that move to declare her disinterest in the whole affair.

"Isn't that unusual? What type of creature is it?" Sanguine asked curiously as she moved to get a better look at Zah Zah.

Lex had to fight not to say something snarky to the donkey-goblin woman asking that question.

"Her name is Zah Zah. When I started making her, she was supposed to be a cat... well, a cat demon, like Ginh Zah, who's a real cat demon. But every time I'd recast the spell to make her, I'd make changes to make her better until she wasn't much like Ginh Zah at all anymore." Lucky said seriously.

"What a beautiful story. So Zsa Zsa ended up being herself." Sanguine said with a smile of delight.

"Yeah. I guess so. But I'm still trying to figure out how to make it so that she can be happy." Lucky regretfully admitted.

"Why do you think that she isn't?" Sanguine asked curiously.

"Because she isn't nice. Sometimes she'll attack people for no reason or just because she's in a bad mood." Lucky said anxiously.

"When you put it that way, it sounds like half the people I deal with on a daily basis." D said honestly.

"There *are* such people in the world." Sanguine confirmed.

"Is that them?" Paul asked as a group of four short, stout creatures tentatively entered through the front gate.

Each of them had the same gray coloring and long donkey-like ears that Sanguine and D had recently adopted.

"Yes. Undoubtedly, the first of many. Now the evening can *really* begin." Sanguine said happily before stepping away from D's group to welcome the newcomers personally.

* * * * *

"Are you feeling a little conspicuous, being human-looking like that?" G asked Paul curiously.

"A little." Paul admitted.

"No one will mind if you want to go full demon. I went full clown, and no one batted an eye." G said honestly.

"Well, I don't feel like I need to put on a show and pretend to be something that I'm not. But at the same time, I guess you could look at this like dressing up to go out." Paul said speculatively.

"Boys, I hadn't anticipated the merging with another realm so soon. I assumed that we'd have more time." D said frankly, then cautiously continued, "It looks like it might be a few minutes before things really get started here. So this might be the best time for us to swing by the fortune-teller's booth so that we can visit with M's family and introduce all of you before things get too crazy."

"Are they going to be mad at us for what happened to Mom?" G asked anxiously.

"I doubt it." D assured his son, then continued on to explain, "If there's anyone who will understand, it'll be them."

"Why? Did they go through something like that?" G asked dubiously.

"No. But due to their gifts, they are capable of witnessing everything that happened from a hundred different points of view. Even if they regret the outcome, I'm confident that they'll agree that all involved took the most reasonable action available to them at the time." D said as he motioned to one of the paths that branched off from the midway.

"How much do you think they already know about us?" G asked anxiously.

"Probably not as much as you'd expect. Even though they have legitimate clairvoyant abilities, they're held in check by very short attention spans and a tendency to become obsessed with innocuous details that are only tangentially related to their investigation." D explained, then motioned toward a particular booth, which was open for business.

"They fall down rabbit holes?" Paul guessed.

"They could teach Alice a few things." D said bluntly.

* * * * *

"Mr. Sticks? You're looking well. Where is the boss?" A donkey-goblin woman in stereotypical gypsy garb asked delightedly when she saw the little stick man walking into her tent.

"I'm here, Nola. I brought my sons to meet you." D said as he followed Mr. Sticks inside.

Paul entered next and had to duck more than a little to keep from hitting his head on the low ceiling of the tent. After looking around to assess his situation, he immediately transformed back to his waking form.

"Sons? The last I heard, you and Emaline had only stopped fighting long enough to make one baby." Nola said teasingly.

G was the next to enter. Although his head nearly touched the ceiling, changing his appearance wouldn't affect his height so he remained his clownish self.

"We didn't fight all that much. And besides, M and I enjoyed two beautiful blissful years of marriage and had a wonderful son together. That can be counted as something of a success." D said frankly.

"I thought you two were married for six years." Nola said cautiously.

"Seven. The last five years weren't what you would call 'beautiful' or 'blissful'." D said frankly, then after a moment of consideration, he added, "They sucked."

As soon as Lex and Lucky passed through the doorway, they realized that their centaur forms were not only too tall, but also too big in general and took up far too much of the limited space in the tent.

With no more than a glance at each other, they both changed into their smallest forms, Lex's being his 'Cousin Lex' form.

"Before we get lost in reminiscing, let me introduce the boys: Paul, G, Lex, and Lucky."

A short gray stout woman dressed in much jewelry and many veils said in a heavily accented voice, "Fortune favors the bold... and here you are."

"Hello, Tyne. It's good to see you." D said warmly.

"I'm glad Gwayne was finally able to traverse the void. Hello, dear, I'm your grandmother. You can call me Grandma Tyne, if you like." The donkey-eared woman said tentatively, unable to interpret G's expression.

Part of the reason for that was that G was stunned into silence and didn't appear to be wearing any particular expression at all.

Before the silence could become too uncomfortable, Grandma Tyne finally continued, "And this is your Great Aunt Nola."

"It's nice to meet you. To be honest, I didn't even know I had a good Aunt, much less a 'Great' one." G muttered absently as his clown makeup adjusted from being blank to a teasing smirk.

"And if you hadn't been able to cross the void, you never would have known." Grandma Tyne said warmly, happy to see that, on some level, G was processing his situation.

"I understand that I couldn't come here before, but I don't know why you couldn't at least tell me." G said, mostly to his father.

Before D could answer, Nola gently explained, "Because nothing is as uniquely poisonous as regret."

D nodded his agreement, then said, "If it were one absent relative, I probably would have told you. But letting you know that you have an entire branch of your family that you can't have contact with could only ever bring bitterness and resentment into your life."

"I still feel like you lied to me." G said frankly.

"I did." D said simply, then explained, "I had a choice to make, so I made it. I was just trying to do my best to make your life as happy and secure as I could."

"Parents will sometimes do that." Paul added supportively.

"Be wary, if you focus too much on regrets from the past, you can miss out on what you have here and now." Grandma Tyne told G gently.

"Of course, if you're determined to focus on the past anyway, you *could* consider sharing it with us. Now that you're here, we would love to hear all about your life." Nola said warmly.

"I have a feeling that Dad has some plans for us tonight. But we'll probably be able to talk more later." G said uncertainly.

"Yes. I think we'd all really like that..." Grandma Tyne trailed off with a secretive grin trying to break through.

At the pause, Nola hurried to add, "Although I don't know of any significant alignment of the stars, there must be some unique confluence of something to bring you and your family here at this particular time."

"Really? What else is going on?" D asked cautiously.

"Something unprecedented. Let's just say that if you're wanting to introduce your sons to their family, today you're going to have an opportunity that you would not have had yesterday."

"I still don't get it." D said frankly.

"Have you or Emaline ever told Gwayne about his uncle?"

"Grief is here?" D asked with surprise.

"He arrived just before you and is in the process of unpacking." Nola said frankly.

"Do you think it'd be alright if we went to see him now?" D asked cautiously.

"I'm certain that he'd be hurt to the core if you didn't. You can come back here and we can have a good visit once you've caught up with him." Nola immediately answered, then thought to add, "But *do* try to keep in mind that he's very protective of his sister and loves her very much."

"Did you hear that, boys? No bad-talking Emaline while we're visiting with your uncle." D said firmly.

"Does that mean that we were allowed to before?" G asked confusedly.

"No. But now, if you slip up and say something cruel, you could hurt someone who is very dear to me." D said frankly.

"Before we go, let me see if I've got this straight." Paul said in prelude, then tentatively asked, "You're about to introduce us to an uncle that none of us has ever even heard of before, who is G's mom's brother, who you care a lot about, and his name is Grief? Is that right?"

After a moment to consider, D finally said, "Yes. Except that his name is really Johnathan, everyone just calls him Grief."

"Why is that?" G cautiously asked.

"I don't know, Gwayne. Maybe because sometimes people don't grow into their given names." D said with a smile, then ushered the boys out of the fortune teller's booth.

* * * * *

"We aren't supposed to be here, are we?" Lex cautiously asked in the claustrophobic dimly lit walkway between tents.

"Regular carnival goers aren't supposed to be here, but we're family. If Grief is unpacking, our best bet is to catch up with him at his tent." D said frankly.

"If you haven't seen him in years, how do you know which tent is his?" G asked curiously.

"Things here tend to stay the same over an expanse of time." D said simply, then explained, "But if he's not where I expect him to be, then we'll start looking around for signs of someone moving in."

"Do you think I should change before I meet him?" G asked anxiously.

"It would probably be better if you didn't." D said seriously as he emerged from the narrow passage.

As each of the boys stepped out from between the tents, they were amazed by the humble little community that had formed within the hidden cracks and crevices of the carnival attractions.

"It's like a world inside a world." Lex said in amazement as he tentatively looked around.

"Built on top of another world besides." Paul added in an equal awestruck voice.

D walked up to a tent and called out, "Grief? Are you home? You've got visitors."

"Who in all of creation would visit *me*?" A male voice asked in return.

"Think of everyone you'd expect to run into here. I'm the next person after that." D said with amusement.

"D? Is that you? How are you? How's Emaline? Is she here with you?" A man started asking before emerging from the tent.

When he did finally emerge, the first thing Paul noticed was that Grief's profile immediately reminded him of G. At a glance, Grief looked *exactly* the way he expected G to look in ten or fifteen years. The family resemblance was striking.

As Grief came more into the light, the next thing that was evident was the black and white face paint that he wore. The makeup around his eyes was shaped to convey sadness and a black teardrop stood alone in a field of white on his cheek.

When Grief stood, he revealed the comically ill-fitting three-piece suit that he was wearing, circa 1900.

"You're my uncle?" G asked in wide-eyed amazement.

"Gwayne? Is that you?" Grief asked uncertainly, then before G could answer, he hurriedly amended, "No. It can't be. You can't be this old already."

"Do you know me?" G asked with the beginning of excitement welling within him.

"I've heard stories. I suppose that things never worked out so that we could be in the same place at the same time before."

"Nobody ever told me that I had an uncle or that he was a clown." G happily chattered.

"We didn't know where he was, what he was doing, or if he'd be coming back. We didn't want to get you excited about having a relative that you might never be able to meet." D said frankly.

"Yeah. I get it. Besides, if I knew he was a clown, I probably would have been a pain-in-the-ass asking all kinds of questions and always bugging you about it, wanting to go track him down and stuff." G easily admitted.

"If you're Gwayne, then who are these others? You're the only one that I've heard of before." Grief said honestly.

G looked to his father, but only received a nod of encouragement.

"The demon spider on my shoulder is named Mah Zah. She's not a pet, just a travelling companion. I can tell you more about her later." G said as he glanced toward his shoulder.

"Can't wait." Grief said hesitantly.

"Next is my adopted brother Paul. Dad married his mom, Beth." G said as he indicated the rather ordinary looking boy beside him.

"I had heard that you had divorced, but little else." Grief said quietly to D.

"We can talk more about that later." D assured him.

Grief slightly nodded, then turned his attention to Paul and said, "It's nice to meet you. I hope that our clowning around won't be too troublesome for you." Grief said sincerely.

"Being around G has gotten me used to it. But if I start feeling left out, I'll just raise a little hell." Paul said with an easy grin.

"Yes he will." G laughed, then continued, "The tiny dragon demon on his shoulder is Ginh Zah."

The briefest spark of a fireball ignited as Ginh Zah's contribution to the conversation.

"Spiders and dragons... nice." Grief said with a smile of appreciation.

"Next is our cousin Lucky." G said as he indicated the younger boy.

"Kyla's son." D quietly added.

"Are you my uncle too? Like Uncle D?" Lucky asked curiously.

"I suppose I can be." Grief said without hesitation, then explained, "Most of our family is family by choice. I don't think being related by blood makes any of us closer than we are otherwise."

"Most people who join the carnival family are from outside, with no blood ties to anyone in any world." D explained to the boys.

"What type of creature is this that you're holding? Another demon?" Grief asked Lucky curiously.

"Zah Zah's more like a copy of a demon." Paul said carefully.

"Or the reimagining of a demon." Lex interjected.

"Yeah. I made her." Lucky proudly declared.

"You *made* your own demon?" Grief asked dubiously.

"It sounds a little crazy when you say it like that." G cautiously admitted.

"Is there a way to say it that doesn't sound crazy?" Grief asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, G finally said, "No. Not really."

Grief spared Zah Zah a long, uncertain look, obviously not knowing how he felt about the pseudo-demon.

"And this is Lex, our..." G hurried to say, but fell short of explaining their relationship.

"G is my son by birth, Paul is my son by marriage and Lucky has status as my son by virtue of our blood relationship. Lex is my son by 'other', more magical, means." D said carefully.

"Well, no matter how it happened, from the look of him, I wouldn't be surprised to find that he's related to me and Em, too." Grief said frankly.

"How I look is an illusion." Lex said as he became taller and took on G's usual appearance.

"How... I mean, you said that he's made from magic... he looks like me... like when I was his age." Grief rambled.

"He's an air elemental who has taken the form of my son." D said simply.

"Yours and Em's?" Grief asked to be sure.

"He looks like me, how I *really* look." G said frankly as he let his clown form fade away to reveal his waking self underneath.

Grief looked back and forth between the two identical boys and seemed to be at a loss for words.

The little horse-like creature on Lex's shoulder reared up on his hind legs in challenge, daring Grief to say an unkind word toward his chosen companion.

"Hold on. The *air* elemental has a *water* elemental watching over him?" Grief asked hesitantly.

"They kinda watch out for each other, but yeah." Paul said quietly.

"But I always thought that Kelpies were evil creatures that would poison you and try to eat your soul." Grief said honestly.

"Do anything to hurt Lex and I bet you'll find out just how true that is." Paul said seriously.

"I wouldn't ever want to do anything to hurt him. He's family." Grief declared, then looked around as he continued, "You all are."

"Do you need any help moving in?" D asked as he looked around.

"No. I travel light. I was just putting a few things away. It's nothing that can't wait for later. We've already arrived at the oasis, so I need to get ready to perform. I've got to earn my keep. Nobody rides for free." Grief said seriously.

"Since you're not three feet tall with donkey ears, I'm guessing that you're not counted as part of this realm yet." Paul said speculatively.

"I am and I'm not. I kind of took a leave of absence. The realm will decide when I've earned my way back in." Grief said simply, then ducked back into his tent.

"When we get back out to the midway, you should all change back to your 'performance' forms. Not only will it help you to fit in here better, but I think that you'll probably have the most fun." D said seriously.

"You don't have a performance form, do you?" G asked curiously.

"None worth mentioning. Mr. Sticks and I will be content to stay off to the side and let you have the stage for an evening. If any of you run into difficulties or have questions, we'll be nearby to help you out." D said warmly.

"Should we go ahead and change now?" Lucky asked curiously.

"Wait until we're away from these tents. I have a feeling that you'll navigate your way between them better if you're smaller." D said frankly.

"I'm ready. Let's go." Grief said as he stepped out of his tent carrying a top hat and an umbrella hooked over his arm.

"Uncle Grief, I've always been a clown but I've never *really* been a clown. I mean, I was born with it and I've been going mostly by instinct. But I'm not sure if I'm doing it right." G admitted anxiously.

"Instinct is the best way to start out. I'm sure you're exactly where you need to be. But when we get out there, you can show me what you've got and I'll let you know if I have any suggestions for you to further develop your own style."

* * * * *

When the group emerged from between the tents, the change was remarkable. What had been a creepy, mostly empty carnival had transformed into a joyous bustling madhouse of people enjoying the attractions.

As soon as the family were free from the confined passageway, Lucky and Lex immediately transformed into their centaur forms.

The reactions of the nearby Huell was amazement and delight at the spectacle of the bizarre beings suddenly in their midst.

Paul was initially resistant to the idea of putting himself on display, but by the time they reached the midway, he had decided to go against his reserved nature and let loose a little of the 'showman' which he usually held in reserve for Friday afternoons.

D and Mr. Sticks resisted the urge to tell the boys where to go first and allowed them the freedom to explore.

As soon as G and Grief were among the Huell, they began interacting with them, mostly with the adults and older children. While Grief's humor was more physical, with plenty of stumbling, bumbling pratfalls, G's was more magical, with showy little 'tricks' to fascinate and amaze.

Even though G was adept at sorcery and could create gigantic elaborate scenes, in this circumstance, he delighted his audience with clouds of brightly colored buzzing insects, armies of tiny, clicky little pastel-colored crabs, and various assorted eeping furry little rodents to skitter and romp amongst his admiring audience.

Lex and Zephyr had taken it upon themselves to offer horsey rides to some of their more ardent fans. At any given time, it was difficult to say whether it was the unicorn centaur or miniature kelpie that the riders were more fascinated by.

Lucky had an audience of Huell children gathered around him to watch him weave magical forms out of Wizard Light strings and strands. The scribbled white snowmen were an immediate favorite. Every so often one of the children would look over at Zah Zah, who was curled on Lucky's back, and realize that she was made out of the same magical materials that Lucky was drawing with.

Paul's fans kept more of a respectful distance, but were no less engaged with the dangerous creature that was in some cases over three times their heights.

While Lucky's magical playing had been focused on fantasy manipulations of Wizard's Lights, Paul's was more generalized. He made plumes of flame, which was enough to impress some people. When he twisted them into little gurgling fountains of water, he drew the interest of some of those who were more familiar with magical principles.

In the end, Paul's audience didn't appear to be as enthusiastic as some of the others, but they were undoubtedly impressed by what they were seeing.

"I hope this will end up being a fond memory for all of them." D said down to his companion.

Mr. Sticks' lack of reaction was taken as agreement to the sentiment.

* * * * *

G heard the nearby crowd beginning to 'ooh' and 'aah' over some new delight.

As he looked at what had caught their attention, he was surprised to see six instances of Grief, all moving in perfect unison, performing some sort of comical dance routine.

G intellectually knew that the illusionary manipulation that Grief was using was a simple one, a reflection multiplication. It required little magic and next to no crafting. Be that as it may, the way in which Grief was using the reflection spell was nothing short of brilliant.

The presentation was enthralling.

While G knew that he could do far more complicated and magically demanding illusions than what Grief was presenting, he was surprised to realize that it didn't matter in the least. Grief beat him hands down in creating a performance that people would *want* to see and eventually look back upon fondly. It wasn't a competent casting, it was artistry.

* * * * *

"Things seem to be going well." Sanguine said as she sidled up beside D.

"I think that we could call this excursion a success, based solely on the amount of fun that Lucky is having." D said with a tender smile at the winged centaur boy.

"This works out very well. I've been wanting to get some more wholesome activities for the families who visit us." Sanguine said frankly.

"You don't plan on entrapping whole families here, do you?" D asked cautiously.

"No. Of course not. Those capable of making a choice, will still make a choice. Those not, will at least get an evening of entertainment to remember, hopefully fondly." Sanguine said reasonably.

"From the look of it, you've got the entertainment side of things handled." D said with a smile at Lucky.

"Did he really create the demon cat all by himself?" Sanguine asked curiously.

"As I understand it, he had a little inspiration and basic instruction from his brothers, but after that he did the rest on his own." D said frankly.

"So you didn't give him a little special something to help him along, did you?" Sanguine asked as she glanced at Mr. Sticks.

"I demonstrated a few rudimentary animation spells for him, but they weren't much more than marionette puppetry. Certainly nothing that could be mistaken for sentience." D explained.

"What an awe-inspiring talent for a child to discover; to be able to create an independent being purely out of his own imagination. The implications are staggering." Sanguine said seriously.

"This could go wrong in so many ways. I have a feeling that I'm going to be walking a tightrope between allowing him freedom and being protective of him pretty much from now on." D said frankly.

"I think there are quite a few responsible people who have to walk a tightrope like that. Although, I admit, yours may have consequences more extreme than many." Sanguine said speculatively.

"Tell me, Sanguine, in your travels, have you heard of something called 'The Children of the Sun'?" D asked cautiously.

"The first witches? I heard a little about them when I was a child, but I never put much stock in any of it." Sanguine said distantly as she watched how her guests were enjoying their visit.

"I didn't grow up with those stories at all and I was just trying to get a sense of who or what they're supposed to be." D said frankly.

"I seem to recall having been told stories about them, but that was a very long time ago. I don't actually recall what type of creatures they were even purported to have

been. I suppose, being as young as I was, that I imagined them being of my own people. As I recall, the gist of the tale was your typical, run of the mill, origin story. It was just some silly thing to explain where witches came from." Sanguine said casually.

"That aligns with what I've been hearing. It sounds like 'The Children of the Sun' could be the progenitors of witches, potentially having the power of *all* witches." D said speculatively.

"Theoretically yes, but, as I'm sure you know, nothing like that goes unchecked. If such a creature were released into your realm, before long there would be a counter-force to constrain it." Sanguine said confidently.

D slowly nodded as Sanguine seemed to notice something going on with a group of visitors.

"Excuse me." Sanguine quickly muttered before dashing away.

D pondered what had been said for a long moment, then turned to his companion and asked, "What do you think about it?"

Mr. Sticks faced D for a moment, then slowly turned away to face Lucky, who was joyfully playing with some of the younger Huell children.

D began to slowly nod, then said, "I can't help but think that there must be a reason for him to be here."

Mr. Sticks turned his non-face toward D and waited.

"You might be right. We may be dealing with the reverse, a force that runs in opposition to reason."

Chapter 21

"Excuse me, but are you showing us a real thing, or an illusionary fantasy that you've constructed?" An elderly Huell gentleman asked Paul cautiously.

"I don't have a talent for illusions. I'm just showing off a few of the magic tricks that I've learned." Paul said honestly.

Since he had stopped performing his 'amazing' feats, the few people surrounding him began to turn their attention toward other, more exciting, attractions.

"Who has taught you such things? What mastery is this?" The old man asked seriously.

"Honestly, I take a lot of different magic classes, so there are bits and pieces of all of them here. Along with that, I figured out some things on my own. I'd say that most of what I've been showing off here is a mix of Wizardry and Alchemy." Paul said seriously.

"Alchemy? Can you turn lead into gold?" The old man asked with a mischievous grin.

"No. I'm still a long way from that." Paul immediately answered, then added, "But if gold is what you're looking for, I have a feeling that there are a few places around the carnival that would be happy to help you out with that."

"From what I've heard about this place, I think that you may be right. But such things tend to come at a very dear cost." The elderly man chuckled, then thought to add, "By the way, my name is Tisthmus. I am one of the elders of Castor."

"It's nice to meet you Elder Tisthmus, my name is Paul... at the moment, anyway. If I'm going to be doing things like this very often, I might have to come up with some bizarre new name for myself with lots of R's and K's in it." Paul quietly explained.

"Why would you have to do that?" Elder Tisthmus asked curiously.

"I think a big demony guy like me is supposed to have a rough, growly name." Paul said seriously.

"Perhaps, but if you'd care to hear an outside opinion on the matter, I believe that I'd actually prefer that you had a name that I could both remember and pronounce." Elder Tisthmus said frankly.

"Okay. I guess I can see that. I tell you what, if I *do* decide to change it, you can still call me Paul."

"Thank you, Paul. I would appreciate that." Elder Tisthmus said with a smile, then leaned forward to confide, "To be honest, I'm here so that I can warn my people away from the dangers of this place."

"That's funny, I think that I'm here to *discover* the dangers of it." Paul said frankly, then explained, "My dad brought me and my brothers here to experience stuff like this so that when we're out in the world on our own, we'll be able to recognize it for what it is. I think he wants for us to do this when he's around to keep an eye on us and so that he can help us out if we start doing anything *monumentally* stupid."

"So rather than insulate you from the temptations and snares of this place, he's attempting to teach you and your brothers how to recognize and face such things for yourselves." Elder Tisthmus said speculatively, then added, "I had only been looking at this as a nest of vipers, trying to lure in the innocents for their own enrichment. I didn't consider that it might have value in making our precious and vulnerable innocents slightly less naive."

"Yeah. Dad seems to think that people can't learn to resist temptation if they're never exposed to it. I don't know if he's right about that or not, but I can tell you that this is a lot more fun than being someplace 'safe' and being told about the danger." Paul said honestly.

"Your father sounds like a very wise man." Elder Tisthmus said warmly.

"I think he is. If you want to ask him what he thinks about things, he's right over there, standing beside the stick man." Paul said as he pointed.

"Your father is of the Huell people?" Elder Tisthmus asked curiously.

"No. He just looks like one of your people so that he can do his job helping out the carnival. I really don't know exactly what he does, but I'm guessing it'd be harder for him to do it if he looked different from everyone around him." Paul said seriously.

"But still, he brought you here to perform?" Elder Tisthmus asked in a leading tone.

"Where we're from, we're not allowed to show off our magic in public except when we're around the right people and even then, only on special occasions. Dad

brought us here and said that we can perform if we want to. But we can stop and enjoy the carnival whenever we feel like it, too." Paul explained.

"Show me again, what you were doing before." Elder Tisthmus said with interest.

"I was just playing around with some simple states of matter. This time, why don't I show you some of my better tricks?" Paul asked as he made a vaguely circular motion with one hand. As he did, a spell diagram formed on the ground between them.

"Is this a manifestation of the Wizard's Light spell?" Elder Tisthmus asked curiously.

"Yes. It's one of the first things that I learned how to do. I just made a few changes to it to make it useful in other spellings." Paul said before making a few short, precise gestures.

Elder Tisthmus watched with interest as four little flames sparked into being around the diagram.

"I didn't realize when you were doing that before that the flames had a use beyond the novelty of them." Elder Tisthmus admitted.

"Yeah. No one told me that I couldn't use them instead of candles, so I did. Everyone seemed really surprised when it worked." Paul said as he made a twisting gesture with one hand and one of the flames became a gurgling fountain.

"I saw you do that earlier. That's very interesting. I don't think I've seen anyone else do that." Elder Tisthmus said, this time in slow concentration.

"Yeah. It's another thing I did because I didn't know I wasn't supposed to be able to." Paul said seriously, then did a quick tweaking motion, causing another of the flames to twist itself into a tiny misty tornado.

"I think I can see what you're doing, although I can't see the usefulness in it." Elder Tisthmus said frankly.

"Not everything *has* a use. Some things just *are*." Paul said simply.

"Have you found a use for these strange manipulations of yours?" Elder Tisthmus asked curiously.

"Hold on." Paul said as he made an obviously uncomfortable gesture.

When he did so, one of the two remaining flames suddenly seemed to freeze in place and change from a flickering yellow-red flame into a shiny red crystal, sparkling with the light from the remaining flame glistening in it.

"For someone who knows nothing about magic, this probably wouldn't look like much. But someone who has an idea about spell dynamics and how to power them could probably see a way to use these in just about every spell." Paul explained.

"The four elements, yes. I can barely contemplate how having such custom-tailored elements to work with would impact the spell you're casting." Elder Tisthmus said in concentration as he watched.

"Well, to be honest, I haven't really tried to do much more than a healing charm with them. But I have a feeling that I'm going to be discovering all kinds of new ways to use the elemental flames. In fact, I just thought of something to try. It doesn't use all the elements, but this might actually be a better demonstration. For this wizardry I'll just use flames of water and air." Paul said frankly.

"Aren't most wizardries based in fire?" Elder Tisthmus asked cautiously.

"Yes. But not automatically using fire allows me to bypass some of fire's restrictions and use a lot fewer spell components to achieve the same result." Paul said seriously.

Paul slowly raised his hands and caused the circle on the ground to rise up on a pillar about two feet tall.

"This, what you're doing, goes far beyond the mastery of my people." Elder Tisthmus said as he took a step back.

"This is just sparkle and flash. It's not much more than Wizard's lights and basic magic put together to look like something impressive." Paul said simply.

Elder Tisthmus cautiously stood forward and touched the pillar before saying, "You've either created stone or drawn it up from deep underground. Either way, it's a skill my people would have to work for years to develop."

"Actually, this isn't stone, it's air. I've just turned it solid for a few minutes and made it look like stone. As soon as I stop feeding it magic, it will go back to being regular air again." Paul carefully explained.

"Still, it's very impressive." Elder Tisthmus said seriously.

"Do you think so? Let's see what you think of this." Paul said with a grin as the four-sided spell diagram reformed itself into a seven-pointed star inside a circle. Some of the points of the star had wind 'flames' and others had water.

"What type of spell design is this? I don't recall seeing anything like it before." Elder Tisthmus slowly asked.

"That's probably because I just made it up. I got this idea of something that I'd like to try, and I came up with this to see if I could make it work." Paul admitted.

"To my knowledge of such things, it is a rarity when a practitioner of the arts has an opportunity to experiment and develop new spells. Most work to increase their knowledge and power with spells that have already been written." Elder Tisthmus said frankly.

"Yeah. I've noticed the same thing back home. People are afraid of taking chances and of discovering new things. They're happy enough 'exploring' what's already been created and everybody already knows is safe." Paul said frankly.

"I would have to say that your people and mine seem to have that in common." Elder Tisthmus grudgingly admitted.

"Let's pour some magic into this thing and see what it does." Paul said with a grin as he turned his attention to the low pillar between them.

"Wind and water, lend your essence to this, my spell. Give us sight beyond sight. Allow us to transcend barriers and see into forbidden places. That which permeates all and that which is omnipresent, grant unto us the gift of omniscient gaze." Paul said dramatically while performing high-level hand manipulations to craft and guide the magic far beyond the scope of his words.

"What have you done here?" Elder Tisthmus cautiously asked as fog formed over the spell diagram.

As the fog began to clear, an intricate labyrinthine structure was revealed beneath. It appeared to be delicate and incredibly detailed, but at the first sign of movement within the maze, the true wonder of Paul's spell became apparent.

"I created a bird's eye view of the carnival. That part's actually not too hard to do, but after that, I made it so that we could see through roofs and see where all the people are and what they're doing inside the different tents and buildings. Don't

worry about their privacy, they're too small for us to see who's who or exactly what they're doing." Paul said seriously.

"Is this some sort of augury?" Elder Tisthmus asked uncertainly.

"I guess there could be an augury like this. At least, I don't know of any reason why there couldn't be. But the way I made it, this is actually a deep Wizardry." Paul said frankly, then explained, "Using my 'elemental flames' makes it so I don't need a ton of supplies to manipulate the magical forces feeding the spell."

"Yes. I believe I can see how that works. But this spell... what do you call it?" Elder Tisthmus asked uncertainly as he looked at the tiny representation of the carnival.

"It doesn't have a name. I kind of came up with it on the fly. I think I'll call it the 'Oculus Supra' until I can come up with something better."

"I can't deny that your Oculus Supra has the potential to be useful. But witnessing you create a new spell has been incredibly informative and inspirational for me. I would very much like to be able to share this experience with the young practitioners among my people." Elder Tisthmus said honestly.

"I never really thought about *me* inspiring anyone. I got a late start with magic, so I always feel like I'm trying to catch up." Paul quietly admitted.

"I can't speak for your people, but among the Huell, I feel safe in assuring you that you *are* caught up." Elder Tisthmus said warmly.

"Even though I can do some flashy things to impress people, I know that I still have a lot to learn." Paul said sincerely.

"Perhaps, but it is my hope that in your learning, you don't lose the sense of wonder and enthusiasm that drives you to try new things." Elder Tisthmus said seriously.

"Yeah, I guess I can see how that could happen, but fortunately I ended up in a pretty good place. I've got people around me who encourage me to do great things. But those same people will also tell me when I'm being too uptight and when my jokes aren't funny. I think I'm right where I need to be. I'll be alright." Paul assured him.

* * * * *

"Ready for a break?" Grief asked G casually.

"I don't know if I should. After seeing the way you put on a show, I feel like I have too much to learn to be goofing off. I need to step up my game." G said honestly.

"You're doing fine. You're exactly where you should be at this stage of your life. Just follow the mood of the crowd and see to it that everyone is having a good time. If you can manage to do that much, you'll already be matching my goal, you'll just be going about it your own way." Grief called to G before performing a complicated move with his top hat and umbrella which was dignified, elaborate, and ended up being absolutely charming.

G looked around the crowd that had gathered and thought about what it was that they really wanted to see. He had the ability to make any number of things appear before them, looking completely real... But the people surrounding them weren't looking for reality. They were there to indulge their taste for fantasy. Their hunger was for something that they couldn't get in their day-to-day lives.

"How about this? I'll make a move and you see if you can match it and maybe even improve on it. We can do that for a while and see where it takes us." Grief said a bit manically.

"Okay. But just so you know, I can do high sorcery and channel an extreme amount of elemental air. I can't promise that I won't overreact if I'm pushed too far." G cautioned him.

"It's all in good fun. We should be fine. Don't do anything to endanger our audience and don't expect me to copy you exactly. If I can't do something identical, then I'll try to do something equivalent." Grief said as he flipped his top hat high into the air and easily caught it on top of his head.

Seeing that they had begun, G quickly visualized a simple fedora in his hands, then gave it the most rudimentary level of rigging and physics. When he flipped it into the air, he had complete control over it and it landed exactly where he wanted it to.

Several of the Huell applauded G's successful completion of the challenge. Others gathered around with interest to watch.

Seeing that G had matched him, Grief casually flipped his top hat into the air slightly ahead of him, then fell into a quick tumble. When he rolled back to his feet, he easily caught the top hat and put it back on his head.

"Excuse me, Mah Zah, but I've been challenged. I'm sure you understand." G said with his clownish smirk excessively evident.

In response, Mah Zah climbed down G's body and settled into a spot a few feet away from him.

The wall of Huell spectators backed away from her, more out of fear than respect.

Mah Zah was satisfied with their choice as she watched her chosen companion, the mate of her sworn charge, defending his honor.

G mimicked Grief's throw of the hat and tumble, move for move, then once he was back on his feet with his hat on his head, he took hold of his hat and threw it high into the air, this time slightly behind him and as he did, he fell into a backward tumble. He easily sprang back to his feet and caught his hat in one lithe move.

The spectators voiced their approval of the move, along with their belief that G had successfully 'one-upped' Grief in their competition.

Grief got a determined look, then picked up his closed umbrella and dramatically thrust the tip of it into the ground.

As Grief walked around in a circle, keeping the tip of the umbrella in place, trace images of him seemed to be following him, lagging a step behind.

In the end, there were four identical instances of Grief moving in the perfect synchronization of a rhythmic dance in a circle.

G's first instinct was to duplicate Grief's performance, move for move. He knew without a doubt that he could recreate it easily enough. But before he could go so far as to cast his spell, he realized that he was capable of doing one better.

With a little of the dramatic flourish that his clownish appearance demanded, G crafted a creature on the fly. Taking more than a little inspiration from Mah Zah, he made a big fluffy spider, but rather than being an exact duplicate of her, his creation also had large leathery bat wings, not unlike Mah Zah in another of her incarnations.

As soon as the minimally crafted and rigged figure was complete, G set it loose on a direct course to attack one of Grief's reflections.

The mechanics of the constructs was such that when the flying spider made contact with the reflection, the minimally constructed clone collapsed in upon itself.

"Hey! I thought you were going to copy me!" Grief said playfully.

"You don't win the race by following. To have a chance at winning you have to get a step ahead." G said as he directed his winged spider to attack the next reflection clone of Grief.

As the second clone burst like a soap bubble, Grief drew up his umbrella and quickly opened it.

As soon as the umbrella lost contact with the ground, the last clone faded away, his spell having been broken.

When the open umbrella dropped to the ground, Grief was nowhere to be seen.

"Invisibility? That's a pretty good trick. You'll have to teach it to me one of these days." G said, sounding properly impressed.

Before anyone could think that G was admitting defeat, the winged version of Mah Zah began flying low over the clearing and spewing forth a fine mist of webbing.

It took a moment, but enough of the webbing finally gathered to identify where the invisible person was hiding.

"I see you." G said with his actual smirk being outrageously amplified by his clown makeup.

"I didn't think you'd be able to improvise like that. Most kids your age can't do anything that they weren't taught in a class." Grief said frankly as he stood.

"Yeah. Well, you can thank Dad for that; he sent me to a really good school. I've learned about reacting to unexpected attacks for years in my gym class. Besides that, I've also had a few work-study adventures that have helped me to think even further outside the box." G said proudly.

"What do you say we give these nice folks a spectacular show-stopper, then take a few minutes to talk?" Grief asked hopefully.

"Sure. What did you have in mind?" G asked curiously.

"In case you hadn't made the association, I have a great appreciation for the debonair silver screen stars of ages past, not just the comedians, but also the romantic leads." Grief said honestly.

"I really didn't have any clue what you were trying to do. I could see that you're cool and have a lot of style, but I didn't know what the style was." G hesitantly admitted.

"That's okay. The Huell don't even know what movies are. I'm used to people not getting it. I just wanted to tell you so that I could explain why I would like for us to do a big musical number to close out our first performance together."

"I get the general idea of what you're saying, but I've never really watched those kinds of movies. I probably wouldn't be able to do a very good job of recreating one." G said hesitantly.

"From what I've just seen, you'll do fine contributing whatever you can think of." Grief said confidently.

"What are you planning to do for music?" G asked uncertainly.

"I know a few tricks, but before we do that, do *you* have any musical talents?"

"I can play the calliope."

"You don't happen to have one on you, do you?" Grief asked cautiously.

G smiled maniacally, both physically and via his clown make-up, then he made a show of pulling a small, folded piece of paper out of his pocket.

When he flipped it out on the ground, it unfolded dozens of times to finally reveal a full-sized calliope.

"We definitely need to talk." Grief said with a grin, then doing much as G had done, he pulled an entire wearable drum kit out of some unknown orifice and was somehow wearing it in less than two seconds.

"Any requests?" G asked as he placed his fingers on the illusionary keys of his calliope.

"Just play." Grief said as he spun his drumsticks in preparation.

G started playing a melody that was more of a dirge than what one would think of as 'carnival' music.

It took a moment for Grief to understand what he was doing, but soon enough he was able to pick up G's beat.

The swimming melody of the calliope didn't take all of G's attention, so once he was comfortable and somewhat confident in what he was doing, he started manifesting all manner of little creatures to whiz and scurry around in time to the music.

At one point, G was surprised to see some strange small animals and insects that weren't his creations. When he glanced at Grief with question, he understood that Grief was adding his own contribution to their performance.

G gave Grief a significant nod, then brought his song into its final refrain.

Grief caught onto what he was doing and changed the timbre of his drumming, making it somehow more vibrant, yet also more chilling.

When G's final note faded to silence, the calliope and all their other creations simultaneously vanished.

In the end, Grief and G were standing before their audience, awaiting their reactions.

As they waited for some sort of applause or other acknowledgement, all they received was a vast ocean of blank stares.

G was the first to catch on to the fact that none of the Huell were looking *at* them. It seemed that the entire crowd was looking *past* them.

When G turned, he was pleased to see a familiar young unicorn looking back at him.

"How are things going, Lex?" G asked with a grin, aware that they had an enormous audience watching their every move.

The unicorn's shape shifted quickly and easily into the unicorn centaur form of Lex.

"Lucky and I saw you two doing something over here and wanted to check it out." Lex said happily.

As Lex was talking, Lucky approached in his Pegasus form, followed by a respectable number of Huell children.

"We just finished, but we could probably do an encore performance if you really wanted to see what we were doing." G cautiously offered.

Lucky also transformed, then turned to face his Huell followers and asked, "Do you want them to do some more so we can see it?"

A resounding cheer erupted, not only from those who had been following Lex and Lucky, but also the group that had been watching G and Grief.

"Do you want to?" G asked Grief cautiously.

"One of the keys of showmanship is to give the people what they want." Grief said with a smile.

"Okay. But I think that this time, Lex and Lucky should help us out." G said with a smile at them.

"I don't know how to play any music." Lucky cautiously admitted.

"Then dance or sing or do magic. Maybe make a few magic ribbons or scatter some Wizard's lights around, if you feel like it. This is all about doing something that everyone can enjoy." G explained.

"I guess we can do that." Lucky said uncertainly, then looked at Lex quizzically.

"Where are Zephyr and Zah Zah?" G asked cautiously as he looked around.

"I don't think either one of them was having much fun with the kids, so we put them away when we fully transformed." Lex said honestly.

"Zah Zah can come out again when we're someplace less busy. She doesn't like crowds." Lucky helpfully added.

"What do you want to do, Grief? Any ideas?" G asked hopefully.

"You're all witches, right?" Grief asked cautiously.

"Yeah, close enough." G said cautiously, not wanting to explain further.

"Then let's make some magic!" Grief said happily as he started walking away, using his umbrella as a walking stick.

Every time the tip of his umbrella touched the ground, a clone of him 'freeze-framed' then continued walking, a step behind.

In the end, there were five reflection clones following behind him as he circled G.

With a grand lifting gesture, a calliope appeared to erupt from the ground in front of G. The manifestation was reminiscent of one of Paul's stone tables.

"If you can do some ribbons, I can do some wind." Lex told Lucky with a grin.

"I think I'll do better if I'm all the way changed." Lucky said honestly.

"You go ahead, and I'll jump in when you're ready." Lex assured him.

G took that as his cue to begin and started playing a lilting melody which spoke of dust motes flitting freely on the wind.

Needing no further bidding, Lucky transformed completely into his Pegasus form and spread his wings wide.

After a few huffs and neighs as he turned in a tight circle, little magical strands began to trail out after him, flicking and flowing, doing a dance.

True to his word, Lex also transformed, then used his command of the air element to cause a breeze to circulate not only around Lucky but also around their gathered audience. Lucky's delicate magical threads and strands were caught by the flow and began to lightly flutter higher into the air.

As the tempo of the music began to build, another figure wandered into their midst to join the performers.

The lone figure confidently stepped in front of Grief and G, then proceeded to show all in attendance just what rhythm was created for.

G was his band. Grief and his clones became his backup dancers. Lex and Lucky were providing fanfare, the perfect backdrop to herald his arrival.

Regardless of what anyone had originally intended, Mr. Sticks was well and truly the star of the show.

Rather than be put off by the unexpected development, G embraced it by increasing his tempo to give Mr. Sticks even more to work with.

Grief and his backup-dancer clones moved in perfect unison to help emphasize and enhance Mr. Sticks' dramatic and perfectly executed moves.

Lex and Lucky were inspired to increase their efforts, creating a flurry of confetti and streamers all around the entire audience.

* * * * *

"Dad, there's someone I'd like you to meet, if you've got a minute." Paul said as he walked up to his father.

"Mr. Sticks is stealing the show, as always." D said with amusement as he watched the performance a moment longer, then turned to Paul and continued, "I have plenty of time. Who do you have here?"

"Dad, this is Elder Tisthmus from the Oasis of Castor." Paul said in a reasonably formal tone.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Elder Tisthmus. I'm Aloysius Darroch, most people refer to me as D. I'm the Keeper of the Second Earth Gate to this realm." D said professionally.

"So, are you responsible for the abductions and ruined lives caused by this place?" Elder Tisthmus asked sternly.

"No. That's not my department." D said simply, then explained, "Actually, I see to it that the gate is functioning correctly so that no one gets trapped here who didn't make a choice."

Elder Tisthmus considered that for a moment, then his attention seemed to be drawn by the ebullient celebration.

"The danger's not in this, in moderation; it's in excess. The carnival redirects those whose passions rule them, to a less... destructive fate, from a societal perspective." D quietly explained.

"So you're saying that this realm of yours is actually a benefit to us by taking the most greedy and lustful out of our communities?" Elder Tisthmus asked cautiously.

"The carnival can make use of people who are so driven. In time, some of them may see past their passions and return to their societies, perhaps with some cautionary tales to tell. Others... are defined by one characteristic and end up becoming that thing to the exclusion of all else." D finished uncomfortably.

"So when they leave, the carnival has to recruit to replace the people who've gone back home or who have stopped being useful?" Paul asked uncertainly.

"Sanguine might be right. You *do* have a good mindset for this." D said with a note of pride under his words.

"I had always believed that the Autumn Carnival was a scourge that preyed on our weak and vulnerable." Elder Tisthmus said somewhat distantly.

"If by vulnerable you mean cowardly, selfish, and morally bankrupt, then I suppose that you were right."

Chapter 22

"Paul? Do you want to help us with the grand finale?" G called out hopefully.

"I can't turn down an opportunity like that. I'll be right back." Paul said to his father and Elder Tisthmus before dashing away to join his brothers.

"He told me that you're not really of the Huell people." Elder Tisthmus said absently as they watched the grand finale ramping up to the next level.

"That's right. I adapt to the realm we're visiting to make it easier to interact with the indigenous people and address their concerns." D said as he kept the majority of his attention on the celebration.

With Paul's arrival, intermittent fireworks of all colors began snapping and flashing in the air above the delighted crowd.

"So are you a demon, like your son?" Elder Tisthmus asked cautiously.

"No. Paul is adopted. I'm an Earth Realm witch. I have a biological son, he's the clown playing the calliope." D said proudly.

"What a glorious spirit he seems to have."

"Yes. And I'm so happy to see it. I had hoped that coming here would end up affording a chance for him to learn more about himself." D said honestly, then thought to add, "The other two, the Pegasus and the unicorn, can be counted as my sons as well, although they've come to me more recently."

"It bodes well for them to have such power and for them to put it to such delightful use." Elder Tisthmus said warmly.

"I suppose so." D cautiously agreed, then explained, "I'm still expecting at least one of them to make a questionable decision and need to be bailed out."

"I can't speak regarding the others, but Paul seems to be quite level-headed. He appears to be willing to explore and try new things while maintaining a reasonable amount of restraint. I've noticed that the young of the Huell rarely take delight in their magic, except in the context of a competition. They craft elaborate spells to outdo each other and prove how strong they are in their magic. But what good is strength that isn't directed to a purpose? What good is magic that is meaningless?"

"I'm sure that some people would say that the magic we're witnessing right now is frivolous and perhaps even meaningless." D stated simply.

"This combination of music and magic is uplifting. It inspires and brings joy into the world." Elder Tisthmus said frankly.

"And competitive magic doesn't?" D asked curiously.

"I suppose it's a matter of degrees. The uplifting magic and the competitive magic can both provide inspiration, but they can also both be misused and taken to an unhealthy extreme."

"Yes. I'm a fan of moderation. Maybe not in *all* things, but where it makes sense." D said simply.

"I can see the value in what you're saying. With your moderation philosophy you're providing the nurturing that your sons need to develop a sense of security. At the same time, you're allowing them the freedom to gain self confidence that they will need in their later lives."

"I hope you're right because I don't have a backup plan if it doesn't work."

"From what I've seen of Paul, you won't need one. Keep doing what you're doing and I'm sure your boys will be fine." Elder Tisthmus said confidently.

"I'm glad you think so, but there's a lot more going on with them than you can see, and a lot more than I can tell you. Let's just say that there are forces at play over which I have little to no control."

"Let me guess... In-laws? Work? Perhaps a vengeful old rival? Such things happen, and not just to you. I don't know what forces you're talking about, but I can assure you that we all have things pulling and tearing at us, trying to destroy what we're trying to build. It's called life." Elder Tisthmus said sagely.

"Thank you for putting it into perspective for me, Elder. I'll try to keep that in mind." D said sincerely, then thought to add, "I was told about a performance by a fairy dance troop and was thinking of taking the boys. Would you care to attend with us?"

After a moment to consider, Elder Tisthmus finally said, "I suppose there wouldn't be any harm. If there is a problem with my people, I'm confident that they will seek me out."

"It looks like the boys are about to give their grand finale." D said with a smile.

"Their uninhibited celebration amazes me. It brings me joy just watching them." Elder Tisthmus said wistfully.

"Then I'm sure you'll understand why I'd like to preserve this moment in some fashion."

"How's that?" Elder Tisthmus asked curiously.

D made a quick gesture that could easily be mistaken for him swatting at a flying insect. Once he was done, he finally said, "I've made a quick imprint that I can render in an album later. It's something like a photograph, except that I don't have the bother of a camera."

"I hear your words, but I don't understand what you're saying." Elder Tisthmus said slowly.

"Your people may not have developed that technology." D said speculatively, then continued, "I just caught the image of a frozen moment that I'll be able to go back to and make a painting or sketch of it so that I can be reminded of the events of this day."

"How would that be different from me going home and sketching what I've seen from memory?" Elder Tisthmus asked curiously.

"I'll have access to a little more detail and I'll be able to turn it so that I can get the best viewing angle, but it'll end up being basically the same thing."

The fireballs started popping in rapid succession while ribbons and confetti continued to fill the air. People were cheering and bouncing with joy as they followed along with G's grandiose music. Mr. Sticks was the embodiment of emotion as he took his dancing to a nearly acrobatic degree.

"Little showoff." D said fondly.

A blinding series of flashes and pops preceded a jarring moment of darkness and silence.

Even D, who had seen it coming, held his breath in anticipation.

A dim haze of Wizard's lights cast a warm glow over the crowd as the carnival seemed to come into focus all around them.

"Did we just travel to another realm?" Elder Tisthmus asked uncertainly.

"No. I'm sure we didn't. Although that combination of lights, sounds, and sorcery illusions made it seem as though we did for a moment." D confirmed.

"What a joyous, delightful thing. I'm so glad that I visited tonight." Elder Tisthmus said with a tranquil smile.

"Boys! There's going to be a show starting in a few minutes. We need to be going." D called loudly to be heard by all his boys.

"Is that the one Bob was telling us about?" Paul asked, a little breathlessly as he ran up to his father and the elder.

"Yes. Shows tend to start at the top of the hour, so we should be going if we want to see the beginning." D said seriously.

"Guys! Come on! We're going to see a show. A friend of mine is going to be part of it." Paul called to his brothers as he transformed back to his human-looking, waking self.

G remained in his clown form and approached with Mah Zah once again perched on his shoulder.

Lex and Lucky simultaneously transformed from their animal forms back into their fully human looking appearance, Lex choosing his 'Cousin Lex' form.

"Can our new friends come with us?" Lucky asked hopefully.

Paul seemed to be about to answer, but instead looked at his father with question.

"Yes. Of course they can. I'm sure the fairy troop will appreciate the show of interest in their production." D said as he gestured for his boys to follow.

Mr. Sticks fell in at D's side, which was his rightful place.

"Thanks for showing them how it's done." D said to his companion with a level of affection born from familiarity.

* * * * *

"I think clowns are wonderful." A young voice said from behind G.

He glanced behind him and saw an adolescent Huell boy looking back at him with undisguised adoration.

Before G could think of how to respond, the boy continued, "I was just wanting to know, how do you become one?"

"It's different for different people." Grief said as he fell into step at G's side

G motioned for the boy to walk between him and Grief.

"I became a clown as a way to escape from my problems." Grief said honestly.

"Do you regret it?" G asked curiously, not having the vaguest inkling of Grief's history.

"No. Not at all. I love being a clown. I'm just saying that not everyone becomes one the same way, or for the same reasons. I think it's important for our friend here to know that before he makes any important decisions."

"My name is Wombee." The boy timidly contributed.

"That sounds like a pretty good name for a clown." G said frankly.

"Really?" Wombee asked hopefully.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" G asked with an exaggerated smirk.

"Well, actually..." Wombee trailed off as he watched carefully for G's reaction.

"Wombee, my name is Grief, and this is my nephew G. If you're interested in learning about clowns, I can tell you about some things that aren't common knowledge. I'm guessing that G's mother was acting true to form and not sharing important information. So it'll be good for him to hear this, too."

"You mean he became a clown without knowing what he was doing?" Wombee asked cautiously.

"I was born a clown. From what Dad said, I get it from my mom. But I don't know much more about it than that." G said simply, then further explained, "She left before I was really old enough to understand very much."

"I don't know how things went for her after she left the carnival, but while she was here, she was one of the stronger clowns. Being both a witch and a clown gives us two different wells to draw from." Grief carefully explained.

"Your mom was a witch *and* a clown?" Wombee asked in amazement.

"Yes. And so are we both." G confirmed, indicating Grief and himself.

"Being both doesn't make us super powerful or anything. It just gives us a few extra resources." Grief explained.

"I think I noticed that just now, I wasn't using my illusion spells the way I'm used to. Everything I did was smaller, faster, and more colorful."

"I think that is mostly an expression of your clownistry, it encourages you to adapt to your audience." Grief said speculatively.

"If I had to describe what it felt like, it would be that I was trying to amaze instead of impress." G said thoughtfully.

"That's a good way of putting it. You're learning sorcery, right?" Grief asked seriously.

"Yeah, mainly illusions." G confirmed, then thought to add, "I'm also pretty strong with air manipulations."

"You mentioned that before. I could see that being a really good mastery back where I'm from, but from what little I know of it, I don't imagine there's much call for it in *your* world." Grief said seriously.

As G shook his head in confirmation, Wombee cautiously asked, "So you're not from the same world as G?"

"No, I'm not. G is from Earth and I'm from Goltha." Grief easily responded.

After a moment to search his memory, G finally admitted, "I don't know where that is."

"It's a lesser realm, about a century or so behind yours in its social development. It's all witches and rangles, none of the mundane humans that you're accustomed to."

"You have people without any magic at all in your world?" Wombee asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah. The funny thing is, we've been living with them for thousands of years and they still haven't figured out that we really exist." G said with a chuckle at the absurdity of it.

"Even though the mundanes think they run the place, the Earth Realm is still a hub for several interdimensional species. D exposed me to a little bit of what goes on behind the scenes with regulating the gates... Let's just say that I'm glad I'm a clown." Grief said honestly.

"Grief, do you want to lead the way, since this is your home?" D asked from the front of the formidable crowd that had developed.

"No, thank you. I have some clown business to take care of right now. Go ahead." Grief responded seriously.

D made eye contact and gave a decisive nod to confirm that he had received the message. From his expression, there was no doubt that he wasn't disappointed with Grief's response. He had simply been offering Grief the leadership role as an acknowledgement of his familiarity with the carnival.

"Wombee, it looks like we're going to be in an amphitheater for a little while and we probably won't be able to talk as much as we might like. Do you have any big important questions for us before we go in?" Grief asked seriously.

"I've wanted to be a clown since I was old enough to understand what clowns are." Wombee said seriously.

"What are they?" G asked curiously, then qualified, "I'm interested to know how you see it."

Grief nodded his agreement with G.

"Clowns are every joy and every fear that you've ever felt, all brought to life, so that they can be expressed and felt and eventually accepted." Wombee said slowly, obviously struggling to put it into words.

"Um, okay. If I thought about it for a dozen years, I probably never would have come up with that answer, but I think you're probably right. That not only covers

what we are, but also *why*." G said honestly, then looked to his uncle for confirmation.

"If you've already got that part, then the rest of it is mostly just dress-up." Grief said frankly.

"But what about the magic?" Wombee asked curiously.

"The more you commit to being a clown, the more the magic will 'help' you. Usually, it will follow your lead, or it may whisper suggestions in your ear. As you continue on, the magic will manifest to cause the unlikely and absurd to consistently fall into place around you." Grief carefully explained.

"So you don't control it? It just happens?" Wombee asked curiously.

"You don't control it, but it doesn't control you, either. After a while, you begin to get familiar with certain patterns and you'll know if you do a thing, you'll get a particular result... usually something comical." Grief said honestly.

"I notice that both of you have make-up that changes depending on how you're feeling. Is that something you do, or does it just happen?" Wombee asked cautiously.

"I was magically transformed into a clown, all of a sudden, so I didn't go through the usual development process that most clowns do." Grief said frankly.

"I was born with it, so I never had to put on make-up, not even once." G said honestly.

"But I've been around enough clowns who are starting out to know that most of them start off by doing everything manually or with another type of magic. As they get stronger in their clownistry, they gradually develop their full-fledged clown abilities." Grief carefully explained.

"Is there anything we need to know about before we go into this place?" G asked as they approached the grand entrance to the amphitheater.

"Just do your best to be respectful and not distract from the performance. The performers work hard to try and give you your money's worth in entertainment." Grief said honestly.

D waved them on through, indicating that he had paid for all of them, including Wombee and Elder Tisthmus.

G did a quick visual survey and accounted for his entire family as they entered.

* * * * *

Paul was honestly at a loss for words when he saw the performers take the stage.

Although he intellectually knew that the members of the carnival transformed to accommodate the realm that they were visiting, he didn't follow through with that train of thought to speculate that the fairy troop might be comprised of something other than typical fairies.

When the donkey goblins with fairy wings took the stage, Paul stared in absolute shock.

There was a small orchestra present who began playing some relatively complicated music, and did so competently.

As the music began to play, the stout little Huell fairies took their places and very precisely worked through the intricate forms of a dance, which had been choreographed to conform *exactly* to the formal music.

Although the collection of pot-bellied gray creatures with floppy ears were almost comical at first sight, Paul couldn't help but admire the precision with which they performed their dance.

Every member of their dance troop moved in perfect unison and performed flawlessly.

The music was a bit formal for Paul's taste. Once he had acknowledged within himself his admiration of the dancers for their performance, all he had left was to witness more of the same.

While what the dancers were doing wasn't strictly repetition, there was enough 'sameness' to it to make the whole thing blur into something of a slog.

A movement in the scaffolding above the stage caught Paul's attention and he was happy to see a sudden flash of blue.

Before he could even formulate a reaction, Bob dropped into the midst of the dancers, who all immediately froze at the intrusion.

Likewise, the orchestra stopped playing, causing a pregnant pause in both sound and action.

One trumpet began to play a radically different style of music from what they had been playing before.

Bob began moving to the beat of the single horn, and was captivating in his exuberance.

One by one, the members of the orchestra joined in with the horn as the dancers also seemed to be catching on to what was happening.

As Bob joyfully flailed and bobbed on the stage amongst the dancers, they changed their style of dance completely.

The orchestra, the dancers and Bob worked together to bring the entire production to a momentous conclusion.

The assembled audience erupted into spontaneous applause at the delightful and joyous turn that the performance had taken.

Paul joined in, clapping and cheering his sincere admiration for both the initial performance as well as Bob's contribution.

On his shoulder, Ginh Zah let out a few screeches and a fireball or two to express her own appreciation of a truly entertaining performance.

Before Paul could discuss it with his family, he noticed that someone had joined their group and was speaking rather seriously with Lex and Lucky.

* * * * *

As Paul approached, G, Grief, and a Huell boy joined him to investigate the situation that was developing.

"We've seen the power that you have. You can fix this. You can make it like it's supposed to be." The slight woman with bluish-gray skin said firmly.

"She's from the Hall of Mirrors." G quietly explained.

"That's Sia. I know her from when I worked here before." Grief quickly supplied, then thought to add, "Paul, this is Wombee."

"Nice to meet you." Paul said to the boy, then turned to the others and asked, "What does she want with Lucky?"

"That's a good question. Let's find out." G said assertively.

"He's the alpha." Paul said with a slight grin at Grief.

"Good to know." Grief said with an uncertain smile in return.

* * * * *

"Nassir's not been able to run his booth properly since he lost his arm. I saw your magic, I felt it. What you were able to do in the Hall of Mirrors was far beyond anything I can do. You can fix his arm and make things be right for him again." Sia said with certainty.

"I don't know anything about healing." Lucky protested.

"You can fix his mechanical arm to work properly." Sia clarified exasperatedly, as though Lucky should somehow already know.

"Oh, that." Grief said in realization.

"What is it?" G asked curiously.

"My other magic, that isn't clown magic, has to do with charms and mechanics. I tried to help Nassir with his prosthetic arm, but it was beyond my ability." Grief explained.

"If it's more than you can handle, what does she expect Lucky to do about it?" Paul asked curiously.

"I don't know. Something must have happened to make her think that Lucky has an ability that could help." Grief said uncertainly.

"Yeah. We're not really sure about that either. It happened in the Hall of Mirrors, it was kind of a wishcraft thing." G said uncomfortably.

"That would do it. Wishcraft skirts the limitations of known magic by eliminating the process and focusing entirely on the result. It's a very dangerous type of magic to employ because the cost is usually impossible to anticipate." Grief said slowly as he tried to calculate just how many ways this could go wrong for them.

"Let me guess, is that Nassir?" Paul asked as he indicated a stout Huell man determinedly approaching with a large cumbersome mechanical arm that could easily be seen at a distance.

"Yes. Hortense is a Djinn who's sworn to his service. She's been driving herself and everyone around her crazy because she can't fulfill Nassir's wish, for him to regain full use of his arm." Grief explained.

"But she think's Lucky's different kind of magic can do what she can't?" G asked cautiously.

"Yes." Grief confirmed, then explained, "And it makes sense. If Lucky really does have wishcraft, he can magically call for a result and the magical world around him will provide the means for it to be accomplished. It's basically like writing a blank check to get what you want."

"What kind of payment does it usually call for?" Paul asked slowly, already having some slight idea.

"Anything, really. Sometimes it calls for something beloved to be sacrificed or even a life price. If the magic is powerful enough, it can even spawn a new reality, where the thing wished for is at the center of the universe's reason for being. If that thing ends up being lost, the whole universe collapses in on itself." Grief said frankly.

"You don't think Lucky could do that, do you?" Paul asked G uncertainly.

"I don't know. After what I saw him do in the Hall of Mirrors... he actually might be able to." G reluctantly confirmed.

"No wonder Sia sought him out. This could very well be a once in a lifetime opportunity for Nassir." Grief said anxiously.

"I can't work or be of any use with this damned thing hanging off me. Hortensia says you can make it work like it's supposed to." Nassir declared upon his arrival.

"This isn't really the best place to be doing this." D calmly interjected.

"Piss off. If this boy can fix my arm, then we need to get on with it." Nassir said firmly.

"It's okay Uncle D." Lucky said with an adoring smile at him, then he turned to Nassir with a cold look and said, "You need to be careful what you wish for, and who you wish it from."

"Can you do it?" Nassir asked without further prelude.

"I can fix your arm, but I can't fix you." Lucky carefully answered.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Nassir asked cautiously, showing the first signs of concern for his actions.

"Do you want your arm fixed? Do you *really* want it?" Lucky asked seriously as he held Nassir's gaze.

"The loss of my arm has been the cause of my ruination. The restoration of it will allow me to return to my glory days." Nassir said with certainty.

"I'll ask again. Is a functioning arm what you *really* want?" Lucky asked slowly.

"Yes." Nassir responded without hesitation.

"Then so shall it be." Lucky said as he focused his attention to the arm hanging at Nassir's side.

The dull metal arm reduced in size and became noticeably shinier and more streamlined.

Nassir experimentally raised the arm and easily made a fist.

"What's the cost for this?" Sia asked cautiously.

"Now you ask?" Lucky asked with a malicious chuckle.

"What do you want?" Sia demanded to know.

"Nothing at the moment." Lucky said simply, then added, "Go ahead and live your life. Return to your glory days or maybe even forge some more glorious ones. But you need to know that the arm now has a mind and spirit of its own. If you mistreat it or blame it for your failures in life, it can and *will* return to me."

"You can't do that." Nassir snapped.

"Really?" Lucky asked with a smile, then focused on the arm and said, "Farook, come to me."

The arm easily detached from Nassir and flew through the air to land gently in Lucky's outstretched hand.

"I give you this so that no matter where you are, you can come back to me." Lucky said as he made an insanely complicated gesture.

Paul recognized the spell diagram etched on the back of the metallic hand as being a reverse summoning circle, although it was far more complex than any diagram that he had ever created.

"Farook, if you decide to return to me, this is what you have to look forward to." Lucky said as he turned himself half around and transformed into a Pegasus. However, the winged horse now had two pairs of wings, one of them made of glorious shiny metal.

The Pegasus turned in place one more time and Lucky returned to his waking form.

"Go on, Farook, it's time for you to start your next adventure." Lucky said as he released the metallic arm in a slow, underhanded pitch in Nassir's direction.

The arm sailed through the air and easily attached itself to Nassir's shoulder.

"I hope you have a good life, Nassir. I don't expect you to, but I'm hoping that you do anyway." Lucky said sincerely, then walked to D where he was promptly pulled into a firm hug.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Lex asked as he moved to Lucky's side.

"Yeah. I just don't know where that came from, how I knew what to do... what to say." Lucky said shakily from D's embrace.

"I don't know. Maybe you wished for it." Lex weakly suggested.

"What do you mean?" Lucky asked with interest.

"Never mind. It was kind of a joke... a bad one." Lex timidly admitted.

"No. That might actually be it. What did you say again?" Lucky asked with interest.

"You were saying that you don't know how you knew what to do and I said that maybe you wished that you'd know what you needed to know when you had to face something like that." Lex said cautiously.

"Even though I didn't put my wish into words, I was really scared of doing something wrong and I *did* wish that I could do the right thing and not hurt anyone." Lucky said anxiously.

"How did you come up with a reverse summoning diagram like that?" Paul asked as he joined them.

"I just did like you said. I took something that you showed me, then changed it to do what I needed it to." Lucky said frankly.

Ginh Zah hissed from Paul's shoulder.

Mah Zah warbled a response from G's.

"Both of them said that what you did was a really high-level reverse summoning."

"But will it work?"

Mah Zah and Ginh Zah gave simultaneous responses.

Paul nodded at them, then said, "What you did was way beyond me, but they seem to be sure that it will."

* * * * *

"Now that that's over, did you have any questions for us?" Grief asked his young Huell friend.

"If I became a clown, would I have to join the carnival and go with you?" Wombee cautiously asked.

"No. I mean, you can try if you want to, but the way the carnival works, it usually *invites* you to join." Grief said honestly.

"But being a clown in Castor... I just don't know if I could do it." Wombee said honestly.

"I couldn't make it easy for you, but I might be able to blunt some of the sharpest edges, should you care to try."

"Elder Tisthmus?" Wombee asked with surprise.

"I overheard what you were saying and thought I should assure you that if you wanted to try being a clown, I could provide moral support. That might be enough to keep others from causing you grief while you discover who you are." Elder Tisthmus offered.

Wombee glanced at Grief to see if he were going to say anything.

"It's a common word. I'm not offended by it." Grief assured him.

"What is it? Did I say something wrong?" Elder Tisthmus asked cautiously.

"My name is Grief. I think Wombee was being protective of my feelings." Grief explained.

"Is everything alright over here?" D asked as he guided Lucky and Lex to walk with him to join the increasing group. G and Paul followed immediately behind.

"I think so. Wombee was just saying that he's going to give being a clown a try." Grief easily explained.

"If you'll let me know when you're ready, perhaps I could arrange for you to visit with the infirm in the hospital or perhaps with the younger children at some of the schools." Elder Tisthmus told Wombee with a gentle smile.

"Do you guys know if there are any clown supplies that I'll need that I won't be able to get in Castor?" Wombee quickly asked.

"G and I don't use the typical supplies, but I know who does. If you'll come with me, we'll get you set-up with the basics." Grief said confidently.

"Do you want to go or stay with Paul?" G asked the large spider on his shoulder.

Mah Zah warbled a quick response, to which G responded by hurrying to follow Grief, Wombee and Elder Tisthmus.

* * * * *

"What should we do now?" Paul asked as he looked around the emptying amphitheater.

"This was the only event that I was told about. I'm not sure what else is going on at the moment." D said honestly.

"Oculus Supra." Paul said as he made a gesture over the area in front of him.

A stone pillar erupted from the ground, with a foggy little representation of the carnival on top.

"Here's an overview of the carnival, if that helps." Paul said simply.

"You never cease to amaze me." D said fondly, then after a moment to look over the miniature representation of the carnival, he continued, "Looking at this, the first thing that catches my eye is the Ferris wheel. How would you guys feel about doing something like that?"

"Even though it just goes around in circles, the chance to sit down for a few minutes and watch things happen sounds kinda nice." Paul said honestly.

"Boys?" D asked to his other side.

"Yeah. It sounds like fun." Lucky said happily.

When D glanced at him, Lex responded, "My air affinity approves."

"That's all I need then." D said as he led the way toward the tallest structure in the carnival.

"Zephyr? Do you want to come out? You might enjoy this." Lex asked as he did the most simplified version of a nuggle summons.

The moisture in the air began to coalesce, and finally took form as a kelpie, standing directly in front of Lex, looking up at him.

"Yeah. I think Zah Zah will like being able to look down on everything." Lucky said enthusiastically as he opened his coat.

Without any indication of effort, concentration, or even a spell being cast, the cat-like creature bounded out into the open.

"We're going to go do something fun and I thought that you might like to go with us." Lucky said hopefully.

Zah Zah looked around suspiciously. When she spotted Zephyr, she growled a snarling hiss in his direction.

Zephyr turned his head and his eyes briefly glowed red. Without blinking, he slowly exhaled a foul green fog back at the pseudo-cat/demon.

"Play nice, you two." Paul said with a smile.

"They *are* playing nice. Nobody's died yet." Lucky said frankly.

"He's got a point." Lex said supportively.

Chapter 23

"Pfeffernusse, I brought some people to meet you." Grief said as the group approached an outrageously fat and unrealistically happy clown.

"Based on what the prince, Maltese, has told me, I'm guessing that the clown with the spider on his shoulder is the dark sorcerer clown, G." Pfeffernusse said speculatively.

"Yes. That is correct. We also have with us, the Elder Tisthmus and the young man with him is Wombee, who has asked about what he would need to do should he decide to become a clown. I thought I'd bring him to you, since G and I both came to our clownhood magically." Grief carefully explained.

"You're not willing to give advice on a subject of which you have no knowledge? If this gets out, people might start getting the idea that clowns are responsible... dare I say it? Trustworthy." Pfeffernusse finished with a visible shudder at the suggestion.

"Wombee and the Elder sponsoring him are the only ones to have witnessed it. I trust them not to spoil our reputation." Grief assured him.

"Elder, you're sponsoring a clown in the outside world?" Pfeffernusse asked cautiously.

"Yes. At least, that is my intention." Elder Tisthmus said soberly.

"Not many in authority see the value in whimsey and other such emotional expressions. You provide not only a service for this young man, helping him discover his potential, but also to your society by providing a safe avenue for your people to vent their feelings in a socially acceptable and healthy way." Pfeffernusse said seriously.

"As a new friend recently suggested to me, moderation can provide benefits to both individuals and societies." Elder Tisthmus said frankly.

"So true. So true. In that spirit, I can do no less than provide your young companion every advantage that I can possibly give him. We actually have a booth where young ones can try dressing up as clowns. They also have products for sale which should provide for the majority of your needs." Pfeffernusse said seriously.

"Are these things that you're providing magical in origin?" Elder Tisthmus asked cautiously.

"No. Everything for sale in the shop is completely mundane. Provided that it is purchased, there is no magical element at all." Pfeffernusse assured him.

"Provided that it's purchased?" Elder Tisthmus cautiously asked as a prompt for more information.

"The carnival, itself, can be rather harsh when it comes to shoplifting." Grief quietly provided.

"Let's just say, we don't have a problem with repeat offenders." Pfeffernusse added in the carnival's defense.

"We'll be sure to pay for our purchases." Elder Tisthmus assured him.

"The best people do." Pfeffernusse responded with a grin.

* * * * *

"Zah Zah, come up here so we can go." Lucky said as he held his hands out in invitation.

After a long hesitant moment, Zah Zah finally took the leap and ended up cradled in Lucky's arms.

Lex looked down at Zephyr, then pointed to his shoulder. The Kelpie Nuggle took slow motion flight and was soon functioning as Lex's copilot.

"How are you doing? Do you and Mah Zah need to go back to the Meayithan realm for a while?" Paul asked curiously.

Ginh Zah growled a quick response.

"Does she need to go?" D asked with concern.

"No. She says that this realm doesn't have the same levels of nature magic that we have in ours. They should be fine for a couple days." Paul said seriously.

"I suppose that I can see that. In fact, *we're* the ones who are going to need to watch out for prolonged exposure to this realm." D said uncomfortably.

"But I thought staying on the train at night would take care of that."

"Yes. We can return to Frakish Vallum and it will negate any ill effects. The problem is that gauging the passage of time here can be a bit tricky. The realm is in

perpetual twilight so it's very easy to fall into the habit of telling yourself that you'll leave as soon as it gets dark... except that it never does. For as long as you're being bombarded by exciting sights and sounds, you won't recognize your own tiredness or the passage of time."

"Is it some kind of misdirection spell, like the Brynnhollow barrier?"

"No. I've actually had an opportunity to look at some of the behind-the-scenes spells of this place and there's nothing like that. It really *is* a case of your mind playing tricks on you. They must have created this place to take advantage of those mind tricks that you normally inflict on yourself."

"That's the next level, isn't it?"

"How's that?"

"After learning the crazy complex spells that can change the world, the next trick is learning when *not* to use magic and be aware of the ways that the world changes itself. That way you can achieve your goals without having to expend any magic of your own. Anyone following behind you trying to trip you up would drive themselves crazy trying to figure out what awesome meta-magic you're using to control things on such a massive scale." Paul said speculatively.

"You make standing back and doing nothing sound almost diabolical." D said with a grin.

"Going back to the mundane way of doing things, it ends up being like sleight of hand, allowing others to make the assumptions that work in your favor."

"Four." D said as he took some money out of his pouch and handed it to the Ferris wheel operator.

Paul had been so engrossed in their conversation that he hadn't noticed that they had arrived at their destination.

"Can I ride with you, Uncle D?" Lucky asked hopefully.

"These carriages are big enough that all four of us should be able to ride in one, as long as no one changes into their centaur form." D said simply.

The group stepped forward together as they waited for their carriage to arrive.

* * * * *

"What should I buy?" Wombee asked as he looked at the variety of grease paints and exaggerated body parts.

"Nothing just yet." Pfeffernusse said seriously, then explained, "You can look at the variety of options available, then go back to the booth and try things on if you like. Once that's all done, you can come back here and buy the things that work best for you."

"I appreciate that you're encouraging Wombee to make an informed decision, rather than just trying to take his money." Elder Tisthmus said sincerely.

"I'm sure that's why Grief brought you to me. I do my best to help clowns, both old and new, discover the path that's best for them." Pfeffernusse said seriously.

"I was hoping that you might also have some words of wisdom for G, since my sister has been her usual self and not told him anything about his clown heritage."

"I'm sure that Whisper was acting true to her nature. If you expected her to do otherwise, is that *her* fault?" Pfeffernusse asked curiously.

"I thought after marrying D that she'd pass on what she's learned in her life to her kid... y'know, like moms do." Grief said reasonably.

"Marriage or no, child or no, Whisper is still herself. Expecting her to be something else isn't something she did to you, it's you setting yourself up for disappointment."

Grief looked at his nephew and quietly asked, "Is your mom doing alright?"

"From what I've been told, she's living in a hell dimension right now. You can ask Paul about it if you want to know more than that. He told me that much and I haven't asked for more details... I'm still processing."

"I had a feeling that it wasn't good news from the way D said that we'd talk about it later." Grief said honestly.

"Mom went nuts at Dad's wedding and ended up being sent to hell... that's really the whole story as far as I know. If you want to know anything about how stuff was before she left us, you need to talk to Dad. It's been years since then and I was a lot younger. I didn't understand all of what I was seeing anyway." G said frankly.

"Do you see anything that you like here, Wombee?" Pfeffernusse gently asked.

"Each one of you has his own different way of being a clown. I don't know what kind I want to be." Wombee said anxiously.

"Right now, just look at the choices and choose what appeals to you." Pfeffernusse quietly explained.

"That's right. Once you've chosen some things that you like, then you can refine your choices, eliminate some and exaggerate others until you've developed a persona that will be fun to share with everyone around you." Grief said warmly.

"That sounds so nice. Elder Tisthmus said something about me visiting with kids in the hospital and at school. What can I do that will be the most fun for them?" Wombee asked hopefully.

"Keep it simple." Grief immediately answered, then explained, "Kids aren't stupid, but they don't have long attention spans either. Come up with something so that they'll get the joke just by looking at you. Then, once you have their attention, they can join you in laughing about it."

"Also try to keep in mind that none of us are of your people. Something that may work for one of us, might not work as well with your people and in your realm." Pfeffernusse added.

"I've traveled to several different realms, and I can tell you from experience that it's true. What one group considers hilariously funny, is looked upon with horror and disgust by another." Grief said seriously.

"What we're trying to tell you is to tailor your comedic style to your audience. If your audience is younger, then try to talk to them about things that *they* can relate to." Pfeffernusse calmly explained.

"Somehow I thought a conversation with a group of clowns would be a bit more fanciful." Elder Tisthmus said honestly.

"We're letting you see what's beneath the grease paint. I hope you're not too disappointed." Pfeffernusse said seriously.

"No. Not at all. I appreciate the fact that you take your craft so seriously and are willing to go out of your way to give advice to someone interested in joining your ranks." Elder Tisthmus said sincerely.

"Actually, this is part of what we do. I mean, we entertain, of course. In the good times that provides us the necessities of life, plus a little bit to hold in reserve for the lean times. But along with that, we also recruit to maintain or increase our number." Grief carefully explained.

"And since we're not a race or species unto ourselves, the only way we can increase our number is by recruitment." Pfeffernusse added supportively.

"Except for G. He was born with it." Grief quickly added.

"He's the exception that proves the rule." Pfeffernusse said dismissively.

"Since I didn't make a choice, I don't know if I'm as much of a clown as everyone else." G quietly admitted.

"From the way it looks to me, you make a choice every day." Grief said simply.

"Yeah, but I don't know if that's better or worse. I hide who I am most of the time, like I'm ashamed of it." G said in an agonized tone.

"All I know is that when your father pointed you out to me, he was undoubtedly proud of his son, the clown." Elder Tisthmus said sincerely.

"Yeah. He's never been ashamed of it. He always looked at that part of me like it was something wonderful." G said with the beginning of a smile.

"I think that's part of what made my sister fall in love with him. He loved Whisper just as much as he loved Emaline." Grief said sadly, with his mournful makeup becoming even more pronounced.

"So, my mom's Clown name was Whisper?" G asked to confirm.

"It still is. Whether she chooses to show her clown-self or not, she will always be Whisper to everyone here and it will always be part of her." Pfeffernusse stated simply.

"What's this for?" Wombee quietly asked as he picked up a tube from the display table.

"That's a cream that can be used to remove hair. I don't think you'll be needing that." Pfeffernusse said seriously, then guided Wombee to another table as he continued, "I think this might be more in line with your needs."

"You think I should dress like a jester?" Wombee asked uncertainly.

"I think you should dress in whatever manner you think will be entertaining, but if the jester outfit is the one that caught your eye first, I think you should give it a little extra consideration." Pfeffernusse calmly suggested.

"I always loved hearing stories about court jesters because they were some of the bravest people in the land. When no one else dared speak truth to power, the jester could talk to kings and lords about all kinds of serious things, seeding new ideas and passing them off as jokes." Wombee said admiringly.

"You teach your children some interesting things, Elder." Pfeffernusse said respectfully.

"We encourage our children to discuss the motives that drove historic figures to take the actions that they did. That might cause them to sympathize with certain of those a little more than we'd sometimes like." Elder Tisthmus quietly offered.

"I think that teaching your children to question people's motivations and think for themselves will pay dividends for your society far into the future." Pfeffernusse said confidently.

"Wombee, why don't you go ahead and choose a costume so that we can take you to the makeup table?" G asked encouragingly.

"Do you think I should get this one that caught my eye first?" Wombee asked uncertainly.

"You can if you like. Just keep in mind that if it doesn't work out for some reason, we can come back here as many times as you want until you've found the perfect outfit to express yourself. There's no need to rush." Pfeffernusse assured him.

Wombee glanced at Elder Tisthmus with question. Receiving a slight nod in response, he hurried to gather the outfit, with all its component pieces, including a tiny jester's head on a wand that happened to look quite a bit like him.

"Where can I try these on?" Wombee asked as he clutched his selections to his chest.

"Right through there." Pfeffernusse answered as he pointed at a flap in the back of the tent.

"Is this what you do when the carnival comes to town?" G asked curiously.

"We do many things, satisfying many different wants and needs in several different ways." Pfeffernusse explained.

"And each realm we visit has different things to offer. Part of the adventure is discovering what riches, material or otherwise, there are to be had." Grief elaborated.

"After all this, I'm still not sure whether you're villains or heroes." Elder Tisthmus said frankly.

"What if we're both? What if we're neither? Would it make a difference in how you see us?" Pfeffernusse asked curiously.

"I suppose that that's the reality of it, isn't it? I would have to redefine what it means to be a hero or a villain to include you in either of those categories, but at the same time, it wouldn't be right to exclude you from either of them, knowing what I know now."

"Some see us as a release valve to lessen the pressure on the societies that we visit. Others believe that we cull the most disruptive and extreme elements of a population, allowing those who remain more time to mature as a group. Of course there are others who simply see us as thieves and charlatans, bilking the poor out of their hard-earned money." Pfeffernusse said informatively.

"Don't forget about those heroes and villains." Grief quickly added, then explained, "There are people with black and white thinking who can't help but categorize us as one or the other. They could never even contemplate anything else."

"Yes. Regardless of which extreme they choose to believe, those who paint with such a broad brush tend to be the most easily manipulated. They know what they expect and as long as we give them that, or the illusion of that, the world makes perfect sense to them. They'll fight to defend their preconceived notions and won't bother to interrogate our motives." Pfeffernusse quietly explained.

"Wouldn't that give you an unfair advantage over people?" Elder Tisthmus asked cautiously.

"An advantage, certainly, but I don't know about unfair. We make the most out of the opportunities that we are given, like anyone else. If we happen to be provided some low-hanging fruit, then so be it. A clown's got to live." Pfeffernusse finished with a smile.

"You won't be teaching Wombee how to harvest such fruit, I trust." Elder Tisthmus slowly prompted.

"Is it better for him to proceed blindly and potentially make catastrophic mistakes? Or do you think it would be better if he learned some basic rules to guide him to the most beneficial behavior?" Pfeffernusse asked seriously.

"We're not giving him a weapon, we're giving him a tool. It's going to be up to him to put it to use. Some basic instruction on our part might help him start out in a productive direction." Grief added.

"This is much more than him playing dress up for a weekend." Elder Tisthmus observed.

"Possibly. There's still a chance that this is nothing more than a passing fancy on his part. It happens. All we can do is treat each expression of interest as though it is serious and provide the best advice and resources that we can to encourage their development." Pfeffernusse carefully explained.

"I'm not sure I'm wearing this right." Wombee slowly said as he awkwardly stepped to Elder Tisthmus' side.

"It's the boots, those curled up toes always make it feel like they're the wrong size. You'll get used to it." Pfeffernusse said simply.

"Is the hat backward?" Grief asked uncertainly.

"No. That's right. Look at the doll head, it's wearing it the same way." Pfeffernusse said seriously.

"Oh, yeah. It's funny. Between the clown magic and my illusionary ability, I've never had to worry about what to wear... in my clown form, anyway. My clown clothes just look the way I want them to. Because of that, I've never had to try wearing something that I might not like." G said as he looked at Wombee consideringly.

"We have a whole tent of selections for you to choose from, if you'd like to try something new and different." Grief said in a coaxing tone.

"No. That's okay. I'd just never realized that before." G quietly responded.

"What do you think, Wombee? Do you like the Jester's outfit or would you like to try something else?" Pfeffernusse asked curiously.

"I really like it. Except the shoes... they're really distracting. I don't think I want to get them." Wombee said honestly.

"Try these." Grief said as he picked up a pair of shoes from beside him, then explained, "They'll still match your outfit, but they're comically long as opposed to being ridiculously curly. They should provide the same reaction from an onlooker while being more comfortable for you."

Pfeffernusse considered for a moment, then nodded his agreement to Grief's suggestion.

As Wombee took the new shoes, Grief quietly asked, "Do you have anything to help G. He can make anything he can imagine, but I'm concerned that his imagination may limit him in reaching his true potential."

"High magic and clownistry tend not to mix well. I think that if he's able to allow his inherent clownship to manifest its expression through his sorcery, that he should be able to stand alongside intermediate clowns as their contemporary." Pfeffernusse said consideringly.

"That doesn't seem fair. Other clowns have to work their whole lives to reach the level I was born with?" G asked uncomfortably.

"There are times when life isn't fair. But in this case I believe that things evened out because as easy as it is for you to reach the intermediate level, the master level will be all but unattainable for you. Sorcery and clownistry will only work in unison up to a point. Past that divergence, you will likely have to choose which discipline you will attempt to master."

"That's better." Wombee said as he stood, wearing the new shoes.

"Those look good. A nice match for the style." Pfeffernusse said with a nod of approval.

"Do you want to try any more costumes before we move on to the makeup table?" Grief cautiously asked.

"No. I already like this one better than any of the others." Wombee said with certainty.

"Good enough. This way." Pfeffernusse said as he led the group away from the tables of clown clothing.

Wombee hurried to his side, excited to see what was going to happen next.

* * * * *

"Would you rather sit beside Dad?" Lex asked cautiously.

"No. I'm good. Go ahead." Paul said easily as he scooted into the last seat in the row, making sure that Ginh Zah was comfortably nested on his shoulder.

She had, in fact, curled her tail around his neck to aid in her balance which had the added benefit of providing a luxurious resting place where she could inelegantly sprawl while keeping watch on everything around her.

"I don't know why it seems so important to me. I remember a whole lifetime of having Dad all to myself. I don't know why all of a sudden it's such a big deal." Lex said honestly.

"Maybe with all the magic and stuff, you just need to know that it's for real." Paul cautiously suggested.

"I guess so. Waking up and suddenly being someone else, but still myself... I don't know if there *is* a right way of dealing with it." Lex said honestly as he scooted in beside Paul, then made sure that Zephyr was comfortable and not feeling cramped.

"It looks to me like you're doing just fine. You've been able to keep hold of all the best things from before without upstaging G or trying to take over his life." Paul said frankly.

"Did you think I was going to?" Lex asked curiously.

D sat beside Lex and put an arm around him, not so much as a show of affection as a lack of a better place to put it. Being that he was in his Huell form, his arm didn't interfere with Zephyr's copilot position on Lex's shoulder at all.

Mr. Sticks automatically hopped up on D's lap and quickly took his place. He sat forward attentively, seeming to be excited about their upcoming ride.

Once D and Mr. Sticks were settled in, Paul responded to Lex's question, saying, "No, I didn't think you'd try to take over his life. But looking at the situation you're in, I can see how that could happen, even if you didn't mean for it to."

"Yeah. I guess so. But I know how he thinks and what he feels. I guess I just automatically steer away from the things that I know that he's passionate about and leave them to him." Lex said seriously as Lucky took the final open seat.

D automatically moved his arm to wrap around Lucky at his side. Zah Zah had been placed in Lucky's lap, and seemed to be perfectly content to curl up and sleep there.

"Like me?" Paul asked Lex playfully.

"*That* was never going to happen anyway." Lex said with a grin as a bar on the carriage locked into place across all their laps.

"What about at school? With G being at the head of the class in Sorcery, what are the chances that you two will end up competing for the top position?"

"That shouldn't be a problem. G can have it, he's earned it. Once we have Lucky all sorted out, I'm thinking about going into Wizardry full time."

"Where you can be with Corabeth?" Paul asked curiously as the carriage moved forward one position, so the carriage behind them could be loaded.

"Well, yeah. But that's not the reason. I think G has followed a path that worked best for him, given his control and power level. I think I might do well taking those same talents in a less obvious direction." Lex said frankly.

"You might also investigate if there's any specialty training that you can receive as an elemental. It seems to have changed Dex's life to be able to use his earth affinity to its fullest advantage." D said from Lex's other side.

"I'm not sure if acknowledging that will open doors for me or close them. It might be better to just leave it be and let everyone think that I'm just a regular witch." Lex stated frankly.

"Denying who and what you are doesn't protect you, it entraps you. Be yourself and if you find a closed door, be ready to pound on it. The rest of us will be right behind you, ready to back you up when you need us." Paul said firmly.

"Has someone been bothering you about your demon heritage?" D asked with concern.

"No. But that doesn't stop me from being on guard for it. It's so new and such a big deal for me that I can't seem to really believe that it's not just as big a deal for everyone else." Paul said frankly.

"I think I'll try to follow your example and not let my magical origin become the most important thing about me. I won't hide from it, but I won't lead with it either." Lex said seriously.

"Hang on. I think it's about to start." Lucky called out excitedly.

Paul couldn't help but smile at the younger boy's enthusiasm.

* * * * *

Wombee walked up to the table and joined half a dozen people already there, applying makeup to themselves with varying results.

Before five minutes had passed, everyone in the booth was lined up watching Wombee and cheering him on, calling out their suggestions, encouraging him to be the best clown that he could possibly be.

"You're being too subtle. You're not putting on makeup for the person in front of you, you're putting it on for the person across the room. If *he* gets it, everyone between you and him will get it too." Pfeffernusse said seriously.

"I don't know what to do with my mouth. Should I have a big kissy face or a smile or maybe even a frowny face." Wombee said uncertainly.

"Not a frown. If you go down that road, you become more and more committed to it." Grief said seriously.

"If I were going to guess, I'd say that the rest of your outfit would be thought of as silly. You might want to go with something to match that sentiment." G said speculatively.

"I know! I know! Let me try something." Another of the attendees at the makeup booth said excitedly.

Wombee turned to allow him easy access and held still while he applied copious amounts of makeup.

"That's really good." Grief said honestly.

"Yeah. I don't think I could do it, but it looks good on him." G said frankly.

"Yes. A very realistic depiction of joyousness." Pfeffernusse said critically.

"What was your name again?" The boy who had done the makeup asked curiously.

"Wombee. What's yours?" Wombee asked happily as he looked at himself in a mirror.

"Dayv. If you'll let me, I can do the same makeup on your doll."

"Would you? That'd be great!" Wombee said as he handed the doll head on a stick to Dayv.

"Do you have a name for it yet?" Dayv asked as he worked.

"No. I just got it a few minutes ago." Wombee said honestly.

"I imagine that this little guy is going to help you a lot to make whatever point you're trying to make. He'll always be taking the opposite position from you, so you can explain to him... and to your audience, why you're right." Dayv said as he carefully applied the makeup.

"You're not from the carnival, are you?" Wombee asked cautiously.

"No. I'm from Castor. Why?"

"Because, maybe you could help me with makeup and things when I go out to do my clown stuff... I mean, if you wanted." Wombee tentatively asked.

"I have things to do for school, but outside of that, I think I'd like to help you." Dayv said happily, then handed the doll head back to Wombee.

"That looks great. What do you want to name him?" Wombee asked as he examined Dayv's handiwork.

"A counterpoint to your name, I think. Something like 'Roff'." Dayv said speculatively.

"Wombee and Roff. That has a nice sound to it. You have good instincts for this, Dayv." Pfeffernusse said sagely.

"I think we're done with the makeup. What do we do next?" Wombee asked excitedly.

"Why don't we get everyone around the table painted up and ready to go, then we can go to the clown tent and show off what you've been able to accomplish.

"Can I help you, Dayv?" Wombee asked hopefully.

"I wasn't planning on dressing up, I was just going to watch."

"Come on. It'll be fun." Wombee encouraged.

"I will, if you'll do my makeup for me."

"That sounds fair. Let's do it.

* * * * *

The group were all smiles as the Ferris wheel began to turn, raising the carriage high into the twilight of the autumn sky.

Paul was looking around in the meager light, trying to see outside the carnival to get a sense of the size of the town they were in and possibly of the desert beyond.

As they reached the apex of their ascent, Paul was able to see far into the distance and could suddenly appreciate the significance of what an oasis actually was.

Just as soon as they began their descent, Paul felt an exaggerated sense of being off balance and of falling. It was almost as if his stomach had suddenly dropped out of his body.

He let out a little scream as he gripped tightly onto the bar across all their laps.

He felt Ginh Zah reconfirm her grip on him with her tail around his neck as her claws dug in, just slightly, to assure them both that she wouldn't be swept away.

Even though Lex felt the same sensations as Paul when they started their descent, he also had the added feeling of freezing where Zephyr was standing on his shoulder. The merging of water and air formed a secure ice junction to ensure that come what may, the two of them would invariably remain together.

Mr. Sticks had been holding onto the bar since it had been snapped into place, suggesting that he had already known what was to come. Of course, not having a face, Mr. Sticks didn't have an expression, as such. However, anyone watching would swear that he was happily excited, joyously afraid or any number of other emotions that he was incapable of expressing in the traditional ways.

A slow husky laugh drew everyone's attention.

It took a moment for D to determine where the sound was coming from.

Much to his surprise, Lucky was nearly convulsed with laughter, but rather than the little boy giggle that they would have expected, the group cautiously listened to Lucky's lower and significantly more psychotic laugh.

Zah Zah flashed D a dirty look with her too-human eyes, conveying the sentiment that what she had just endured was undoubtedly *his* fault.

"Are we going to do it again?" Lucky was finally able to ask past his sinister laughter.

"Yes. Probably quite a few times." D slowly stated, then thought to ask, "Would you like that?"

"Yeah. Let's do it again!" Lucky said happily, sounding more like his usual self.

Zah Zah gave D one last look, then nosed her way into Lucky's coat where she promptly returned to the magical essence from whence she came.

"Was that some kind of magic or what?" Paul was finally able to ask.

D wasn't sure if Paul was referring to Zah Zah's reaction, Lucky's laughter, or the physical effects of the Ferris wheel. Regardless, he honestly answered, "I really don't know."

Parvenu 6: The Chronicles of Grief

Chapter 1

"Why do I have to go to bed when Jon doesn't?"

"Now that your brother has come into his full magic he has quite a lot to learn. Just now he's finishing a rather complex project. Your father wants to take a little extra time to teach him as much as he can about the intricacies of the magical ability that they share."

"When I get to be Jon's age, will I have charm magic like him and father or will it be taomatogical like yours?"

"Thaumaturgical, and honestly, it could go either way. In fact, you might even end up with a magical specialty that's all your own. We probably won't have a hint of what your big magic is going to be for a few years yet."

"It's not fair that everybody else gets to use big magic and I don't."

"You'd better get used to it because life doesn't suddenly start being fair when you get your big magic. Invest your time into learning your 'little' magic, so that you'll have a good foundation to build on, no matter what your big magic turns out to be. And just so you know, life doesn't start being fair when you become an adult, either."

"I've heard that other parents tell their children that everything is always going to be safe and wonderful and perfect for them. Why don't you do that?"

"I suppose that I could. I'm fully capable of lying, but I prefer to only do it when it really matters. That way I have a history of truth telling to make my word seem that much more credible."

"So how can I know when you're lying or not?"

"Listen to what I say and do your best to find evidence to support or refute what I'm claiming is true."

"Just like I should do with everyone."

"I'm doing my best to give you and your brother the tools that you'll need to succeed in the world. I think a firm grip on reality is a good place to start."

"But don't you want for us to be happy?"

"One of these days I'd like to take you and your brother on a trip to a farm, so that you can see the docile 'happy' sheep being led to slaughter."

"That sounds lovely. We'll need to remember to pack a lunch."

"I have no problem with you finding moments of happiness to enjoy. I want that for you. But living a life of nothing but happiness is a life without struggle or growth. You weren't meant for that."

"What am I meant for?"

"That's for you to discover. I just don't want for you to think that having all your problems solved is a goal worth pursuing. It isn't. It's a trap."

"But everyone else wants to be happy. Is that wrong of them?"

"Yes. It is. Now it's time for you to get some sleep."

"Goodnight, mother. I love you."

"I love you, too. Goodnight, Emaline."

* * * * *

"You keep telling me how much more responsibility I've got now that I've got my big magic, but you still don't think I'm old enough to take care of Emaline for a few hours?"

"This job is bigger than usual and it's all the way over in Amgor. Even if everything goes exactly to plan, it's still going to take all night. If something goes wrong, it *could* take a couple days."

"Okay. I don't think I'd know what to do if I was watching her for that long. There's lots of stuff that I still don't know. I wouldn't want for Emaline to be scared or hurt or anything because I'm pretending to be more grown up than I really am."

"Just stay with Hostof and Venn until we get back. Your mother has already dropped off some food for the two of you, so you won't have to worry about what's safe for you to eat."

"Why can't they eat the same food as regular people?"

"Jon! They *are* regular people. They just have different dietary requirements than we do."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way that it sounded. What I meant to ask was, do you know why rangles have to mix rocks into their food?"

"I'm not a doctor, but my understanding is that our food binds up inside them. They need the rocks in their diet to break things up and keep them moving along."

"It sounds like something that could be fixed with magic."

"There's nothing to fix. It's the way they are. Don't make the mistake of trying to remake the rest of the world in your own image. It never ends well."

"Hostof and Venn are nice. I'd just like to do something nice for them."

"Then accept them as they are and be sure to express your gratitude for their generous hospitality. They're interrupting their lives to do us this favor."

"I will. I promise."

* * * * *

"Jon. Emaline. Please come in. Have a seat."

"What's wrong?"

"Quite a lot."

"What is it? What happened?"

"The thaumaturgical project that your parents were working on... there's been an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"Every now and then, no matter how carefully the experts plan, there's sometimes a catastrophic failure."

"Did mother get hurt?"

"Emaline, there's no easy way to say this. There was an explosion. Both your parents were killed."

"But father isn't a thaumaturge. Why would he be hurt?"

"The explosion was... apparently it was rather extensive. The building they were trying to reconfigure was completely destroyed in the process. In fact, most of the block is gone."

"They're dead?"

"Yes Johnathan. I'm so sorry."

"What... where are we going to go now? We can't stay here."

"I've talked to the authorities and they've said that you can stay here with us for a few more days."

"But what do we do then?"

"I don't know Jon. I really, honestly don't know."

* * * * *

"I should warn you, the husband has little patience for children... or adults, for that matter. People in general tend to irritate him. It'll be best if you just stay out of his way as much as possible right at the first. He spends all his waking hours in his workshop anyway, so you won't be likely to see much of him."

"I was told that I was to be apprenticed to a master to learn a trade. Should I not begin my duties for him right away?"

"You were told that to legally justify you being here. When I heard that you and your sister had been left alone in this world with no living relatives, it just broke my heart. I volunteered to take you in to ensure that the two of you could remain together."

"If I am not to learn from the master, what will I do to earn my keep?"

"No need to worry about that. The husband has never once been satisfied with the way I keep house or prepare meals. Perhaps with your help, we might remedy that situation and in doing so, find a way that we can all be happy."

* * * * *

"What are these urchins doing in here? Call the constable here to clear them out."

"These are the children I was telling you about, the ones who lost their parents."

"What are you blathering on about, woman? Where's my dinner?"

"It's keeping warm until you're ready for it. Have a seat at the table and I'll fetch it for you straight away."

"You say they lost their parents? How long do you think it will be until they find them?"

"Their parents were some of them that died in that terrible thaumaturgical failure in Amgor last week. I told you all this. You said they could stay with us."

"I did? I must have just been agreeing with you in hopes that you'd stop blathering on and give me a moment's peace."

"We have a spare room and they won't be any bother. They can help me keep house and I can send them around to the shops when you realize that you need something for your work."

"The first time they get underfoot, they're out on the street... you as well, for taking them in."

"They won't be any trouble."

"Fetch my dinner, woman. I need to get back to my work."

* * * * *

"The husband took to the idea better than I expected. Until he's had some time to get used to you being here, I'd suggest that you keep to your room when he's out of his workshop."

"How's he going to get used to us if we're in our room?"

"We'll work that out as we go along."

"How am I ever going to be able to take care of Emaline if I don't learn a skill that people will pay me for?"

"You're far too young to be worrying about things like that. Just now, let's attend to seeing that you get beds to sleep in and food in your bellies. We can worry about you earning your keep down the road somewhere."

"I'm eleven years old and I'm just starting to learn charm magic. If I apprentice with a master machinist mage, that *might* be enough for me to be able to do something great with it. But soon I'll be too old for any master to take me on. If the master won't let me be his apprentice, then I need to move on."

"Nonsense. It's already been decided. You and your sister can stay here with us, and learn valuable skills in housekeeping and hospitality. Those things can carry you for your whole lives just as well."

"You took us in to be your servants?"

"I... we took you in, out of the goodness of our hearts, to give you a place to stay and not have to worry about being separated."

"If we were put in an orphanage, we'd at least have a *chance* of getting some kind of training or education so that we could do something when we grow up. If we do like you're saying, we'll never be anything more than your household staff."

"What's done is done. The magistrate's already said that you two will be staying here, as our children, from now on."

"As your children? Do we get to carry your family name? Will we be introduced as your children? Will we be introduced at all?"

"Such a thing wouldn't be proper."

"I thought not."

* * * * *

"The missus is going to be displeased if we don't clean the kitchen."

"Good. Let her be. I've packed your things. I can't believe that between us, we didn't have enough possessions to fill a single rucksack."

"Where are we going?"

"When I was at the shop getting fresh bread for the master's dinner, I overheard the old-timers saying that an Autumn Carnival has blown into town out of nowhere. I was thinking that If we can get there and find a good hiding place, that maybe we can leave with them when they do."

"Leave? Right now?"

"You can stay here if you want. The missus will probably take good care of you and make sure that you have pretty things to wear so that she can show you off while you're serving her snooty friends. If you wanted to stay, I wouldn't blame you. You need food in your belly and a roof over your head. If you go with me, I can't promise you even that much."

"These are the type of people that mother and father detested... and I can see why. I believe that I would rather go and face the unknown with you."

"You've never said a word about being unhappy here before. Why are you just saying so now?"

"Staying quiet and biding our time has been the most prudent course of action we could take."

"From the way they acted, I don't think it would have made a difference if you had spoken up about how you felt about things."

"Precisely. As Mother used to say, it's impolite to interrupt your adversaries when they're making a mistake. *Everything* they did in regard to us was a mistake."

"So, are you going to be okay with skipping a few meals and maybe getting in trouble if someone finds us?"

"What trouble do you imagine? If they *do* catch us, what terrible thing do you think that they'll do to us? Will they take us away from our family? Destroy our futures? Sully our good name?"

"Here. I made this for you, it's for luck."

"I thought Father said that those types of charms were just wishful thinking, that they didn't really do anything."

"Most of them are. But I think this one really works. I want for you to have it before we're in any real danger, just in case it does something."

"Did Father make it?"

"No. I did. But Father showed me how. It's the last thing... we worked on... together."

"You can cry all you want later, once we're away from this horrible place."

"You promise?"

"Yes. You can cry until you run out of tears, if that's what you want to do. I won't even try to stop you."

"I'll never run out of tears. But right now, let's go find that carnival. This might be the only chance we'll ever have to escape."

* * * * *

"Johnathan, Emaline, you don't need to hide. We've been waiting for you. Please, come along. We have little time and we need to set certain events into motion."

"How do you know our names?"

"I'm a fortune-teller."

"And you were waiting for us?"

"Yes. But we have very little time to help you. Come with us and we can arrange things so that you won't ever have to go back to Mr. and Mrs. Walling."

"Johnathan, you said we might only get one chance to get away. I think that's what this is."

"Opportunities aren't usually so blatant and most times have to be earned. Very likely, this is a trap."

"I suppose in a way that it is. But *this* is a trap that you need to fall into."

"What do we have to do?"

"Emaline!?"

"The door is closing. We need to step in or step out."

"Okay. It looks like this is what we're here for. Tell us what we have to do."

"Just have one of these clown cookies."

"What's in the cookie?"

"Flour, sugar, a little bicarbonate of soda, I think..."

"And a spell."

"What spell?"

"It will bind you to this carnival, make you part of it so that no matter what the constables, the magistrate, or even the Wallings try to do, they won't be able to take you away from here."

"Emaline! We don't know these people. We need to be careful."

"The time to be careful was back at the master's house. Now is the time to take action. I've already decided what I'm doing. I'm not giving up this chance."

"Since mother and father died, I thought that protecting you was my job but I didn't realize that you're strong and smart enough to take care of yourself. I guess you don't need me watching over you."

"I'm seven you dunce. Of course I need you. Now hurry up and eat the stupid cookie."

"He has to do it of his own free will or it will be meaningless."

"He just likes to sit on the fence and worry over things until the last minute. Johnathan, this is it. It's the last minute. Either eat the cookie or we might never see each other again."

"Here, have one."

"What does it do?"

"It makes you one of us."

"Okay."

* * * * *

"How do you feel?"

"I don't know. Did I fall asleep?"

"You seemed to go away for a bit but you look better now."

"How is Emaline?"

"I'm sure she's fine. Tyne took her someplace where she can lie down for a few minutes until she can get her feet back under her."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Nola. Tyne is the Carnival's fortune-teller and I assist her with my augury magic. She interprets dreams and symbols and I help provide her the things to interpret, runes, cards, things like that. It kind of makes this place a one stop shop for all your fortune-telling needs."

"I remember eating a cookie... did it do what it was supposed to?"

"I'd say so. Have a look."

"A clown? You dressed me up like a clown when I was passed out?"

"I did no such thing. That was done entirely by the spell on the cookie."

"So you made me a clown?"

"Now you're part of the carnival. When it leaves, you'll leave with it. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Did you make Emaline a clown too?"

"Yes. Although her change wasn't quite as dramatic as yours."

"Am I going to look like this from now on?"

"That's a good question. I have no idea."

"How could you give me that cookie if you didn't know what it was going to do?"

"I knew it was going to make you part of the carnival. I assumed from the shape of it, that it might make you into a clown. Beyond that, I'm trusting that the preferred future will unfold as we have foreseen."

"If you've seen our futures, what can you tell us about what's going to happen?"

"You're going to become part of our lives. You and your sister are going to live here with us for a time, then you'll leave to go on adventures, then you'll come back, as it suits you. It sounds absolutely lovely to me. I honestly can't wait."

"But I was wanting to find a master mage of mechanics so that I can learn everything I can do with my charm magic and become a master someday."

"I don't see any reason why you can't still do that. The first thing you'll have to contend with is learning how to be a clown... and how not to be one, I suppose."

"You suppose? Aren't you a fortune-teller? Don't you already know?"

"Tyne is the fortune-teller. I'm a witch with access to augury magic. I don't know about what decisions you'll have to face or what price you'll have to pay for them. I just know that, if you'll let me, I'll help you deal with what life throws in your path. I'll give you a hand up when you need it or a shoulder when that's what you need most."

"Will you be there for Emaline too?"

"If she needs me, of course I'll be there for her, but I get the feeling that she won't need me nearly as much as she'll need Tyne."

"So you're going to make us your kids?"

"From an augury standpoint, I caught glimpses of us working together to achieve our goals. I don't know if that makes us family or carnival coworkers or friends, but whatever it is, we all seemed to be better off for it."

"I still get the feeling that the way you made me a clown is just like how Mrs. Walling tried to make me into her servant."

"If you hadn't become part of the carnival, you would have remained in Zetinga when the carnival left. It wouldn't be a choice that anyone made, it's just a fact. If you want to leave with the carnival, you have to become part of it."

"The way you say that, does that mean that the entire carnival is like an enchantment?"

"It's that and much more. With as long as I've been here, I still can't comprehend all of what it is."

"What am I supposed to do now?"

"My first instinct is to tell you to find a more senior clown to fill you in on the do's and don'ts of clownistry. I honestly don't have the first clue about such things."

"This clown makeup makes me look like I'm crying."

"Yes. That's one of the few things that was consistent in all the possible futures that I could scry."

* * * * *

"Kids, you'd better brace yourselves. The time we've been dreading is fast approaching."

"Who's coming for us?"

"Should we hide?"

"You can hide if you like. Let your brother handle this. I think he's best equipped."

"What do you want *me* to do?"

"You're a clown. In the past few days you've started to get a basic understanding of what that means. Now you have an opportunity to experience it in full. Use your newly found clown sensibilities to reason with him, and failing that, if you feel that the situation calls for it, you can unleash the chaos."

"I don't know if I know how."

"I'm not a clown, so I don't know what you're feeling, but by my limited understanding, it isn't something you do, it's something you *stop* doing. If the time comes that you feel like you're losing and don't know how to turn things around, then let loose of your control and just let it happen. Now step out for a moment, he's almost here."

* * * * *

"I was told by some of your recent customers that you're harboring some local children in here."

"Constable Tygr, I believe I know the children you are speaking of, but they belong here, they're part of the carnival. Please come in and have a seat and we can share their story with you."

"Excuse me, Ma'am, but I don't have time for niceties, I need to retrieve the children and take them back to their home."

"What if they don't want to go with you?"

"Then I suppose that I'll just have to take them."

"You can try if you feel that you must, but I think you'll probably get a better result if you'll just take a moment to stop and listen."

"Okay. What do you think I need to hear?"

"Me? Nothing I have to say would make a bit of difference. You need to talk to the children. Ask them why they're here and perhaps even see if you can come up with any alternative to the path that they've chosen."

"I don't decide anything. I just do my job."

"Keeping everything compartmentalized is convenient for avoiding accountability, isn't it?"

"Are you going to call for the kids or do I have to go find them myself?"

"I know you're listening, dear. Would you come in here for a moment? Constable Tygr wants to talk to you."

"I'm only still here because you said that I shouldn't run from my problems."

"About that, sometimes running away *is* the correct response. However, Constable Tygr seems like a reasonable type. I personally think that the two of you will be able to come to an understanding."

"Mr. and Mrs. Walling are very worried about you and your sister and have asked me to find you and bring you back to them."

"They care nothing for us. They saw an opportunity to get free labor. They want to deny us any chance at a future so that we can spend the rest of our lives being their servants. We will not go back to those horrible people."

"The magistrate has decreed that the Wallings are the best people to watch out for your interests."

"Our parents weren't without means. If you're concerned about our interests, you might investigate what happened to our parents' money and property. No mention has been made of it to me. The magistrate made his ruling without ever talking to us. He gave us away as though we were property. Now those horrible people treat us as their servants. We will no longer accept others making decisions for us. We will not return with you. We respectfully refuse."

"You can plead your case to the magistrate, if you want..."

"If he was the kind of person who'd care what we have to say, he would have asked us before now. The Wallings have made their choices, the magistrate has made his, now it's time for you to make yours."

"It's not that easy. I'm bound by my word to carry out my duty."

"If there's a difference between your duty and what is good and right, then you do indeed have a choice."

"I've been sent to retrieve an eleven-year-old-boy named Johnathan Garvin, what was your name, again?"

"Grief."

"Just the one name?"

"Yes. It is not uncommon among the clown-folk."

"Young Mr. Grief, do you happen to know if there is a young girl named Emaline Garvin on these premises?"

"No. The only young girl I am aware of is a clown named Whisper. I can call her in here if you like."

"I don't think that will be necessary. I'm looking for witches, not clowns. If there's no Johnathan or Emaline here, then there's no reason for me to pursue this any further. Believe it or not, there are actual crimes in Zetinga that need to be investigated."

"Thank you for doing your duty and keeping us safe, Constable Tygr. We appreciate it."

"Be well, Grief. Try to cheer up."

* * * * *

"I must say, Johnathan, that you were able to navigate your way through that to one of the best possible futures that I was able to find. I'm very proud of you."

"Please call me Grief. It's who I am now... it's what I am."

"Situations all around the carnival should be coming to a head within the next few hours. Traditionally, all the members of the carnival, both old and new, enjoy a parade through the middle of town before the carnival leaves the realm entirely."

"Won't it be dangerous for Whisper and me to walk the streets of Zetinga openly?"

"I'm not sure if there's some sort of enchantment at work or if the parade itself is the cause, but for whatever reason, the townspeople typically gather to watch the parade and are horrified to see their friends and neighbors quite literally marching out of their lives."

"When you put it that way, I'd *love* to march in the parade."

"Fill Whisper in on what's happening and prepare anything that you need for the two of you to take your places in the grand processional."

"She already knows what's going on. She's been listening the whole time. Whisper? Do you want to march with us in the parade?"

"The clown magic doesn't work for me the way that I expected it to. I don't know if I'll be able to make myself good enough to go out in front of people."

"Since I already started learning my big magic, I have a better idea of how it all works. Tell me what you're trying to do and I'll help you make it happen."

* * * * *

"Mr. Never, it's so good to see you. Children, this is Mr. Never, the owner and master of ceremonies of the carnival. Mr. Never, it is my honor and absolute pleasure to introduce you to two new members of our carnival, the sibling clowns, Grief and Whisper."

"Yes. I've been watching things develop from a distance. Grief, I was impressed with your handling of Constable Tygr. Whisper, I was likewise impressed with your handling of Grief. Well done, both of you."

"So you don't mind us joining you without asking you first?"

"We're all part of the carnival. If it accepts you, then so do I. It's a life of service, but it also provides many rewards, both sacred and profane. And just so you know, I think you'll do well here. You are both very welcome."

"Thank you... What are you?"

"A Cambion."

"You're half demon?"

"Some would say more than half. I choose to believe that they say that to explain my appearance more than my personality."

"Don't people treat you badly because of it?"

"Sometimes. But that mostly comes from people whose opinions I don't care about to begin with."

"Yes. I can understand that."

"I suppose there's no putting it off. We've done all that we realistically can in this town. It's time for us to move on. Everyone! Let the parade begin!"

* * * * *

The blaring music of horns heralded the arrival. The solemn notes being played spoke more of a funeral procession than a celebration.

Businesses emptied onto the sidewalks as people hesitantly left the safety of their homes to investigate what all the commotion was about.

Being that it appeared to be a parade, the procession through town was far more somber than one might expect. The parade seemed to be more an act of defiance and a flaunting of power than any type of celebration.

Mr. Never was nothing less than enthralling in his appearance, being both charmingly nonchalant and coyly demonic all at the same time. He took the lead, which was his rightful place, and no one disputed it. Those who saw him, couldn't help but admire and fear him in his role as uncontested leader of all those who followed him.

Nola and Tyne were dressed in their most extravagant fare with baubles and bangles in abundance. Their status as fortune-tellers allowed them a position near the front of the parade. They walked proudly, secure in the knowledge that they had performed their duties and done their parts to bring about the most favorable future for them all.

Grief and Whisper took their places amongst the clowns. Whisper was walking in her vintage finery with her head held high, carrying a tattered parasol and covered

nearly head to toe in decaying lace. Her clown makeup was such that she looked almost corpse-like with porcelain white skin, although significant cracks were showing around the edges of her face. Her eyes and lips were garishly painted in a grotesque parody of the high society fashion of the day.

Grief was walking immediately behind his sister. He had a battered old umbrella and wore a threadbare and thoroughly patched ill-fitting suit. Grief was following Whisper and exaggerating her haughty movements to a comical degree.

As they marched, Grief recognized a few of the performers from his trips into town for the missus of the house. Not unlike he and Whisper, they had been drastically transformed, but were also still recognizable as themselves.

Mr. Hammerman, whom he had seen in town on more than one occasion, was a local banker. Now he was dressed as a 'strong man' and was muscle bound to an absurd degree with a menacing expression of barely contained rage.

Another person, who Grief only knew as 'Lydia', was a late-teenage girl with long blonde hair, blue eyes and a full-length dress that appeared to be made entirely of baby dolls. From his position following her, he couldn't be sure if the dolls were sewn together, a collection of puppets, or if they were actually somehow alive.

Nearing the entry gate of the carnival, Whisper turned and elegantly waved to their right.

Grief followed the motion and recognized two particular stone giants amongst the crowd. He followed his sister's example and waved in their direction. Although his wave might be considered a bit less formal it was certainly no less sincere.

The giants simultaneously wore matching expressions of recognition, then finally resigned acceptance, like the closing of a chapter.

As the last few trailing members of their troop crossed the threshold, returning to the carnival, a stiff and brutal wind began to blow in earnest.

"If you stop to notice, the wind is blowing *around* you, not directly *on* you. This is all perfectly natural..."

"...supernatural."

"Well, yes. If you want to get technical about it. Regardless, from the outside it will look like the carnival is being carried away by an enormous tornado. To some, the

twisting of realms makes it look as though the carnival is being destroyed in the process."

"From the inside, we get to see the world fall away, like an unpleasant dream. Once we're completely separated from them, we can tend our wounds and take stock of our losses and gains from our latest adventure."

"What should we do right now?"

"I think this first time, you should step back and enjoy the show."

Chapter 2

Grief and Whisper watched in amazement as the carnival began to warp and skew all around them. Buildings changed size and shape, and at times, even building materials.

The people surrounding them were no less mutable, becoming taller, shorter, or even completely different species.

"The people here aren't witches?" Grief asked disbelievingly as he tried to look at everything at once.

"Some are, but witches aren't the only type of people that exist. Most people *appeared* to be more-or-less human since we were visiting a human-type realm." Tyne patiently explained.

"Is that something that the carnival does for you, or do you have to do it for yourself?" Grief asked curiously.

"The carnival does it, mostly. Some people don't feel comfortable giving up control of themselves and will either do the enchantment on their own or ward themselves so that they won't change." Nola carefully explained.

"Of course, there are some realms where you have to breathe water or be lighter than air. People who refuse to allow the enchantment to ease their way can cause an awful lot of trouble for the rest of us." Tyne said darkly, then added under her breath, "I still haven't gotten that stain out of my favorite cushion."

"Let it go, dear." Nola quietly suggested.

"It looks like everything has finished changing. What do we do next?" Grief asked as he looked around excitedly.

"My, aren't you the impatient one?" Tyne chuckled, then continued, "I suppose that since you've had a few days to find your footing, it's time to officially start you on your journey. You two, come with me and we'll find the leader of the clowns so that you can get started."

"I'll go with you." Nola said as she straightened her shawl.

Tyne smiled at the development, then led the way toward the 'big top' central tent.

* * * * *

Once inside, Tyne led them past some bleachers to a smaller partitioned area, away from public view.

"Hello? Shin Shin? Are you back there?" Tyne asked uncertainty.

"You're the fortune teller, you would know better than I." A clown responded as he stepped from behind a sheet of canvas.

Grief was surprised to find that the clown wasn't human-looking and could barely be counted as humanoid. He was nearly the same height as Grief and had little stumpy arms and legs. Grief couldn't decide if he were more fish, amphibian, or mammal, seeming to have attributes of all three. The clothes that Shin Shin wore were flamboyantly colored but didn't appear to be made for him or for any creature like him. They were ill-fitting to say the least. However, most curiously of all, Shin Shin appeared to have a yellow flower growing on top of his head.

"Shin Shin, I'd like for you to meet Grief and Whisper. They joined our ranks in Zatinga and might benefit from some of your expert instruction." Tyne said seriously.

"I've seen them around, then I noticed them marching with us, counted among the ranks of full-fledged clowns. This is some of your witchery, isn't it? You changed them into clowns by way of magic." Shin Shin said as he stepped forward and looked the children over.

"Not *my* witchery, but yes. They were magically changed. Local authorities were snooping around, and it seemed the most expedient solution to several problems at once."

"The mantle of clowndom should be earned, not bestowed. It cheapens all our hard work." Shin Shin said firmly.

"Stuff and nonsense!" Nola blurted out.

"We live in a world awash with magic. If you refuse to help these children, then I don't know what kind of a clown you really are. What does it even *mean* to be a clown?" Tyne blustered.

"How they were made doesn't make a bit of difference. There's no place for such puritanical nonsense in this day and age." Nola added passionately.

"Hold on! I stepped on someone's tail, didn't I?" Shin Shin chuckled, then continued more reasonably, "I never said that I wouldn't teach them, only that I believe that *real* clowns earn the title over time with hard work and dedication to the craft."

"If you really believe those are valuable lessons for them to learn, then teach them." Tyne said firmly.

"Me? No. All they would learn from me is how to say and do the wrong things no matter what situation they're in."

Nola looked askance at him, but didn't bother to dispute his words.

Shin Shin took a few steps to the flap of the tent, then leaned out and loudly called, "Bippy, Daffy, don't start celebrating just yet. I've got a job for you!"

"If you want to talk to us, come out here! They're ♫ about ♬ to put ♫ the food ♬ out." A high squeaky voice responded in a taunting cadence.

"I get no respect." Shin Shin grumbled, then motioned for the others to follow him into the big top.

* * * * *

In the short time that they had been in the changing area between the flaps of the tent, a feast was in the process of being laid out in the form of a massive buffet.

"Everyone will be filing through here shortly, so now would be a good time to get you set up with your trainers." Shin Shin explained professionally.

"You wanted something?" A morbidly obese clown asked in a high pitched giggle as he bounced and jiggled his way to the group. It was difficult to tell if he was gasping for breath or slightly giggling as he waited for a reply.

He was followed by a white-faced girl, thin as a rail, with a single black diamond, almost looking like a teardrop, painted on her cheek, drawing attention away from her complete lack of expression.

"Bippy, this is Grief. He needs someone to show him the ropes. You up to it?" Shin Shin asked challengingly.

"Do I have to stay in character while I do it?" Bippy asked in a grossly exaggerated squeaky voice, interlaced with spasmodic giggles.

"No. That's another thing you can teach him, when to clown around and when to be serious." Shin Shin said frankly.

"Good." Bippy said in a very unremarkable, very relieved voice.

"Go ahead. I'll be checking in on you." Shin Shin said seriously.

"Grief, the first thing I'm going to teach you is just what 'all you can eat' really means." Bippy said with a ravenous grin, then took off toward the first table at a surprising rate of speed for someone so big.

"You'd better go on, if you want to get something to eat."

Grief spared Shin Shin an exasperated look before hurrying to follow.

"Whisper, I believe that it would be a good idea to team you with Daffodil, also known as Daffy!" Shin Shin announced triumphantly.

Whisper looked at the young woman with an appraising eye and came to the conclusion that, as clowns go, she wasn't the *most* objectionable one she'd ever seen.

The young woman turned to face Whisper, then very elegantly and precisely bowed to express respect.

Whisper smiled and was impressed by the dignified gesture, at least she was until she realized just what it was that she was actually seeing.

"She doesn't talk?" Whisper asked cautiously.

"No. She's a mime. They often don't." Shin Shin said, as though it were obvious.

"How am I supposed to learn anything from a teacher who doesn't talk?" Whisper asked belligerently.

"I doubt that it will make much difference; most kids don't listen anyway." Shin Shin said dismissively.

"Just give it a try. If it doesn't work out, we'll try something else for you." Tyne said encouragingly.

Daffy gave a quick general nod of courtesy to the group, then walked away at a casual pace.

Whisper gave all the adults a sweeping glare of disdain to express her opinion of recent developments.

"Have fun, dear." Tyne said with a chuckle after her.

* * * * *

"What am I supposed to be learning except not to get near your mouth while you're eating?" Grief asked slowly, revolted by the way Bippy was devouring mounds of food, barely stopping long enough to take a breath.

"I don't know. Be funny. Make a joke. Just look at me, there's plenty to make fun of. Go ahead and let 'er rip." Bippy said without concern, then went back to his food and appeared to be eating even faster, trying to make up for the lost seconds when he had been speaking.

"But it's not funny. It's sad." Grief said frankly.

"Yep. That's the basis of comedy, kid. The stuff that's too sad or disgusting to face head on, you make jokes about to acknowledge it, so you can get past it." Bippy said frankly.

"So the exaggerated way clowns dress is to make fun of poverty, as a way to address it without actually addressing it?" Grief slowly asked as he struggled to understand.

"Sometimes, yes. Just like a red nose and bumbling around can be meant to satirize chronic alcoholism and slapstick comedy can simulate abuse. Some costumes can represent physical disorders, and sometimes we might just make fun of someone's unfortunate choices. Look around and you'll see the horrors of the world on display for you to laugh at and disempower."

"But I'd feel wrong if I made fun of someone like Shin Shin for being... whatever it is that he is."

"He's a Siyokoy. And you're right. You don't need to make a joke about everyone and everything that you encounter. That gets annoying really fast. But a well crafted joke is often appreciated by just about everyone, sometimes even the butt of it."

"So, if I get what you're saying, then it'd probably be okay if I made a joke about the way you eat?" Grief said uncertainly.

"Yeah. If it's funny, that is. Otherwise you'll just come off as being mean." Bippy said frankly.

"How can you even eat that much?" Grief asked in equal parts amazement and horror.

"I'm Lorkian, I have three stomachs." Bippy answered simply.

Grief considered for a brief moment, then cautiously asked, "Just the three, huh?"

Bippy loosed a good hearty laugh before saying, "Don't worry my young friend. You're going to do fine here."

* * * * *

"How does this day find you, young Grief?" Mr. Never asked as he approached.

"I don't know. I was fine until Shin Shin made Bippy my mentor. Ever since then I've been trying to learn stuff from him without getting too close to his mouth." Grief said frankly.

"Yes. Very good. It sounds like you're learning some valuable life lessons already. Pay heed, they will serve you well, far into the future." Mr. Never said sagely.

"I get the feeling that you're looking at this a lot more philosophically than I am." Grief said frankly.

"I tend to do that." Mr. Never easily admitted, then thought to add, "But somehow it usually ends up working out."

A movement drew Grief's eye and he noticed a rock creature, a Rangle, near his own height, half hiding behind Mr. Never.

Following Grief's curious gaze, Mr. Never said, "Grief, I'd like for you to meet Jean Pierre."

"Hi. Nice to meet you." Grief said quietly, as he was reminded of Venn and Hostof.

"It's nice to meet you too." Jean Pierre muttered uncomfortably.

"Jean Pierre has been with the carnival for a short time and hasn't quite found his niche yet. Would you mind if he tagged along with you for a bit, until he can discover the place where he belongs?" Mr. Never asked hopefully.

"So far all I've done is watch Bippy eat, but I don't mind if he helps me. It might be good to have a second person nearby to act as a lifeguard." Grief said as he watched Bippy ravenously devouring mounds of food, apparently oblivious to the conversation going on right beside him.

"Right then. Let me know if you come to any decisions." Mr. Never said to Jean Pierre, then glanced at Grief and added, "Either of you."

"I will. Thank you." Jean Pierre timidly responded.

Grief nodded his agreement with his companion's sentiment.

Mr. Never got a conspiratorial look, then leaned in to quietly say, "I wouldn't expect Bippy to be finished anytime soon. You two might want to avail yourselves of the opportunity to mingle and meet some other people, then come back when Bippy's stomachs are full... or when we've run out of food... whichever comes first."

Before either could respond, Mr. Never hurried away to attend to other business.

* * * * *

A glance at Bippy was all it took to confirm that what Mr. Never had said was probably true.

"Would you like to get something to eat?" Jean Pierre asked cautiously, apparently not sure if Grief was actually interested in spending time with him.

"Not really. After watching Bippy... I might need a few minutes." Grief said honestly.

Jean Pierre easily nodded his understanding.

"Do they have any food here that you can eat?" Grief thought to ask.

"Yes. All of it. The magic of the carnival makes it so that I don't have to worry about that. It's funny, but I never realized just how much of an inconvenience it was to have such a limited diet." Jean Pierre said honestly.

"When my sister and I stayed with our parent's friends we always had to be careful about what we could eat. I mean, our food wouldn't hurt them if they accidently took a bite or two of it but theirs could really hurt us." Grief said frankly.

"As long as you didn't break a tooth, a little bit shouldn't bother you too much. It would pass in time." Jean Pierre said speculatively.

"Um, no. Thank you. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not find out what that's like." Grief said grimly.

A strange, uncertain look crossed Jean Pierre's face before he quietly said, "I haven't seen her here before. She might be new."

Grief followed Jean Pierre's gaze and recognized the blond girl who was wearing a long flowing dress, apparently made entirely of baby dolls.

"I think her name is Lydia." Grief finally said.

"So she's from your realm?"

"Yeah. I've seen her around enough to know her name, but that's about it." Grief said uncertainly.

"So, do you want to talk to her?" Jean Pierre asked cautiously.

"Yes, I'd like to, just to let her know that she's not alone in all of this." Grief said tentatively.

Jean Pierre took the response to heart and started walking toward the teenage girl.

* * * * *

"Lydia? Is that right?" Grief asked as he approached.

Much to his surprise, several of the baby dolls that made up her gown began making crying and fussing sounds, even though the sounds were only a rough estimation of those of true living babies.

"Hush. Quiet down now. Everything's fine." Lydia gently crooned as she soothed various dolls sewn into her dress.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to bother you." Grief said cautiously.

"It's fine. They startle easily." Lydia softly explained, then quietly asked, "Did you need something?"

Jean Pierre and Grief watched as Lydia continued soothing various dolls and quieted them.

"The way I see it, this place sometimes works kinda like a trap. I just wanted to check in with you to be sure that you don't need help." Grief said honestly.

"I see what you mean about it being a trap, but in my case, I simply made a choice. Maybe someday I'll regret my decision, but right now I feel like I'm exactly where I need to be." Lydia finished with a smile.

"What's with the dolls?" Jean Pierre asked curiously.

Several dolls began to fuss and whimper at the tone of his voice and a few actually growled at him. Grief was surprised to see that the dolls appeared to be moving independently... or perhaps in unison. It suddenly occurred to him that perhaps the doll clothes weren't the only things sewn together. Despite his curiosity, he *really* didn't want to confirm his suspicion.

"Their special ones left them behind and now they need someone to care for them. I said that I would." Lydia said in a soothing voice as she once again attempted to lull the agitated dolls into a tranquil state.

"But those aren't normal dolls. Are they enchanted?" Grief asked cautiously.

"I suppose that some are. It's really hard to say. Dolls that are brand new have never been loved. Those are empty. These dolls have been filled, not just with love, but also with other passions... often to overflowing." Lydia explained, then suddenly said more urgently, "You two had better leave. I can't keep them calm for very long."

"They're not dangerous, are they?" Grief asked as he slowly backed away.

"If one of them took an interest in you, there's nothing that you or I could do to stop them. They would destroy you, slowly... over a period of years." Lydia said frankly.

"Come and find us if there's anything we can do to help." Grief said as he backed away even further.

"I'm right where I'm supposed to be. They need me." Lydia said contentedly as she petted and soothed the mass of writhing dolls engulfing her.

"What about what *you* need?" Grief asked cautiously.

"That doesn't matter... it never has."

* * * * *

"If you're up to it, we could stop by and check on Mr. Hammerman too. He's right over there and he's the only other person I've seen so far that we picked up in my realm." Grief explained as they walked away from Lydia and her dolls.

"If he's anything like the girl, we might not want to get too close right at first." Jean Pierre suggested.

"Good thinking." Grief agreed as they reached the table of food where the muscle-bound man was considering his choices.

"Mr. Hammerman?" Grief asked cautiously.

"What do you want?!" Mr. Hammerman snapped, radiating aggression. Grief was surprised because the few times that he had encountered Mr. Hammerman in town, the man had always appeared to be the gentlest of souls.

"I was just checking to see that you're doing okay." Grief said timidly, then screwed up his resolve and continued more confidently, "I just wanted to see if you're happy with the way things turned out for you."

"Happy! Yeah! That's *exactly* what I am! I am the biggest, I am the strongest, and I am the best! I'm nothing but happy!" Mr. Hammerman passionately declared.

"Um, good to know." Grief said as he involuntarily took a step back from the man's sharp voice and intense demeanor.

"Remember that if you need someone to talk with, we're both new here, too." Jean Pierre quietly offered.

"I've got everything a man could need!" Mr. Hammerman declared confidently.

"Um, yeah." Grief said before walking away.

"Is there anyone else that you'd like to check on?" Jean Pierre asked curiously as he fell into step at Grief's side.

"That's everyone that I noticed from my realm. But considering how it went with those two, I'd probably think twice before talking to anyone else anyway." Grief said honestly.

"I don't know how it all works, but considering how people tend to be, maybe it takes some time before they really grasp their situation. It might take a while before they realize that they have regrets." Jean Pierre said frankly.

"Do *you* have regrets?" Grief cautiously asked.

"No. Not at all. I was just saying that some people only see the surface of things and it takes a while before they realize what they've lost." Jean Pierre said seriously.

"Did you lose something like that?" Grief asked curiously as they meandered aimlessly around the big top.

"Everything that I left behind needed to be left." Jean Pierre said seriously, then added more quietly, "What's funny is, the thing that made me an outcast with my own people isn't even seen as a curiosity here."

"What's that?... I mean, if it's okay for me to ask."

"You can ask me anything. I may not answer, but you're always free to ask."

At Grief's expectant look, Jean Pierre reluctantly continued, "I'm small. Rangles are supposed to be big."

"Oh? I just thought you were a kid like me. How old are you?" Grief asked curiously.

"Thirty-three." Jean Pierre reluctantly answered.

"Really? Wow. I never would have guessed."

"How old did you think I was?" Jean Pierre asked cautiously.

"I never really thought about it. Since you're about my size, I guess I just figured that you were probably close to my age."

"I'll understand if you don't want to hang around with an old man like me." Jean Pierre reluctantly offered.

"That's really not a problem for me. I've always been better around adults anyway. Right now I think that I'd rather try to figure out how this crazy place works and maybe find a place to fit in."

"I think I like your plan better." Jean Pierre said honestly.

"What do you want to do now?" Grief asked curiously as he looked around.

"Actually, I think I'm about ready to stop and eat." Jean Pierre said honestly.

"Yeah. Now that I'm away from Bippy, I'm starting to feel hungry. We can sit at that table over there if you like. I'll introduce you to Tyne and Nola." Grief said as he pointed toward two older women who were seated, apparently enjoying a light dinner together.

"Yes. I suppose. If you like." Jean Pierre said reluctantly as he walked to the nearest table to casually start making his dinner selections.

"Do you not want to?" Grief asked cautiously as he did the same.

"I just don't know them." Jean Pierre slowly confessed.

"I don't know them that well either, but when my sister and I needed a place to stay, they took us in and protected us. They seem nice." Grief said frankly.

"Yeah. Okay. Let's meet them." Jean Pierre said with resolve.

"You don't have to just because I said so." Grief gently reminded him.

"Now I want to. They sound like the kind of people it's good to have as friends." Jean Pierre explained.

"Yeah. I think they're like Venn and Hostof. You know whatever comes up that you can count on them to come through for you." Grief said quietly, unable to hide the pain under his words.

"Those sound like Rangle names." Jean Pierre observed.

"They are. They're the friends of our parents I was telling you about. We stayed with them after our parents died. They took really good care of us and did their best not to let anyone hurt us." Grief said sadly.

"If they were that good to you, why aren't you and your sister living with them now?" Jean Pierre asked curiously.

"We couldn't." Grief said simply, then explained, "Even though no one said it, we all knew that the magistrate would never put us with Rangles, just like he wouldn't put Rangle kids with Witches."

"I've never been to Zatinga, so I'm not sure how backward they are in their beliefs." Jean Pierre said honestly.

"I think regular folks are beginning to understand that people are people. But what I can tell you for sure is that the magistrate is a miserable son-of-a-bitch who pretends to believe in anything that will line his pockets. He basically sold us into slavery and stole our birthright."

"Do you think he's going to go after your Rangle friends?" Jean Pierre asked cautiously.

"I doubt it. There's no money in it. But there's nothing we can do about it if he does. They'll just have to take care of it themselves. If things had worked out differently, we might have ended up being a family. As it is, all I can do is hope that good things will come to them and that they will end up happy." Grief said sadly.

"It looks to me like you're trying to move on from your tragedy and start a new life. That's probably the most productive thing that you could do right now." Jean Pierre quietly observed.

"I'm just doing what I can to give Whisper as many chances as possible at a good future." Grief said honestly.

"I hope that you'll find a way to do that for you both." Jean Pierre agreed, then cautiously asked, "Do you want to stop and eat before your plate collapses?"

"I get to talking and forget what I'm doing." Grief chuckled in realization as he looked at his mounded plate.

"Ready to eat?" Jean Pierre asked with a smile.

"I guess so." Grief said timidly, then added more strongly, "But if I start feeding my face the way that Bippy does, I'm counting on you to stop me... by any means necessary." Grief said grimly.

"Only if you'll promise the same to me." Jean Pierre said seriously.

"It's a deal."

* * * * *

"Would you mind if we join you?" Grief hesitantly asked as he and Jean Pierre stopped at the table.

"We wouldn't mind at all. I'm pleased at the future that you've chosen. Very well done." Tyne said warmly.

"Oh, yeah. They're fortune tellers." Grief quietly explained to his companion, then said to the women, "Nola and Tyne, this is my new friend, Jean Pierre."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Nola said for both of them.

"It's nice to meet you, too, thank you." Jean Pierre said timidly.

"So, it appears that your lesson with Bippy ended a little early." Nola said with a barely restrained smile.

"Yeah. I was a little too distracted to learn very much. I was mostly trying not to be eaten by him." Grief said frankly.

"Mr. Never told us to take the opportunity to meet new people." Jean Pierre timidly added.

"If that's what he told you, then you should do it. He's the one who pays us." Tyne said simply.

"We get paid?" Grief asked hopefully.

"In some sense of the word, yes." Nola said slowly.

"I'm guessing that means 'no'." Grief said resignedly.

"You have to realize that the economics here are a little different from what you're used to. The currency we use depends on which realm we're aligned with, and some realms value the same currency differently than others."

"So we *don't* get paid?" Jean Pierre cautiously asked as he followed Grief's lead and took a seat at the table.

"You do, but not always in currency that you would recognize." Nola assured him.

"You get room and board plus payment in the bronze tokens issued by the carnival. But when we are merged with other realms, our currency changes to become the same as theirs, including the equivalent value." Tyne further explained.

"I can't imagine how complicated a spell like that must be." Grief said honestly, between bites of food.

"It's not something you have to worry about. That's all taken care of by the carnival." Tyne said seriously.

"I'd still be interested to see the spell, just to appreciate the complexity of it." Grief said honestly.

"If you're really interested, you could talk to Mr. Never about it. I actually don't know where the base of the spell was cast or if there's a written version of it, but if anyone would know about it, it would be him." Nola said seriously.

"I guess I don't *need* to know, I just like to study really well written spells to get an idea of how to do my own." Grief said before taking another bite.

"Is your magical specialty numerology?" Jean Pierre asked curiously.

"No. My magic is creating enchanted items and charms." Grief said seriously.

"Then why do you want to study a complex money changing spell?" Jean Pierre persisted.

"I don't know. I just do." Grief said honestly.

"I think I understand." Nola said with a smile, then explained, "Grief is interested in spell structure. Even if the magic is different from his own, a well crafted structure might help him elevate an unremarkable charm into something powerful and enduring."

"Do you think that something like that might work for my elemental magic too?" Jean Pierre asked cautiously.

"I'm not sure. Do you use spells?" Tyne asked in return.

"Not the way that witches do. The way it works with Rangle magic is that I cast my 'want' and the world responds as it will. Sometimes the answer is what I expect, but other times the answer is 'no'... and every now and then, the answer ends up being something worse than the problem I wanted to solve." Jean Pierre reluctantly admitted.

"While Witches formalize things with spoken spells and fancy diagrams, what we end up doing isn't all that different." Nola said frankly.

"I've never really thought about taking my magic to the next level, but it might be interesting to see if I can." Jean Pierre said honestly.

"I would think that if you clearly state your intent aloud while you cast your 'want' it should probably end up working nearly the same." Nola said uncertainly, then looked to Tyne for confirmation.

"I'm certain that someone must have tried it at some point, but I can't recall an account of it being done before." Tyne said consideringly.

"Can you try it now to see if it works?" Grief asked cautiously.

"This might be something best done outside, perhaps for some entertainment after the meal." Nola suggested soberly.

"Yes. Of course. Please excuse me for interrupting your dinner." Jean Pierre said repentantly.

"Don't worry about that. I just didn't want to run the risk of you getting the reputation of being a troublemaker or vandal over some harmless speculation about your abilities." Nola explained.

"Jean Pierre's not a kid, he's thirty-three years old." Grief hurried to inform them.

"Who says that's not a kid?" Tyne asked with a teasing grin.

"When I was thirty-three I thought I understood how the world worked and I knew, without a doubt, that I was right about everything." Nola said, finishing with a laugh.

"Was that before you came to the carnival?" Jean Pierre asked curiously.

"That's right. The world made perfect sense to me at that time. Little did I know that I would soon see a side of life that most beings never discover." Nola said wistfully.

"If you decide that you don't want to be here, can you go back?" Grief asked curiously.

"Such a thing is rare, but it *has* been known to happen. If a person chooses to leave, they'll usually end up with a curse on their tongue or some such thing to prevent them from divulging the hidden realities of the universe." Tyne said seriously.

"Of course people choose to come and go from the carnival all the time for quests and adventures and such like. That's another matter entirely." Nola interjected.

"That's right. We're encouraged to go out into the realms that we visit and explore what they have to offer, then bring that information back to the carnival to share it." Tyne said supportively.

"But if someone plans to leave and not come back, that's somehow different?" Grief asked curiously.

"People who belong to the carnival carry a piece of it. No matter where they go, it's still with them, guiding and helping to lead them to productive ends. Someone who leaves the carnival completely, loses that spark. In the silence, they don't hear the raucous music in the distance calling to them and driving them on. They are alone in a way that we never are." Nola carefully explained.

"If we can leave when we want to, that means that I could still find a master wizard of engineering or charmwork to apprentice for." Grief said speculatively.

"Make no mistake, you'll need to gain control of your clownistry before you try to woo a master wizard into taking you on. There is no future in store for you where you master your magic without mastering your clownhood first." Tyne said firmly.

"Then I guess I'd better finish eating so I can go ahead and get started." Grief said with renewed dedication.